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ATTALA ROSE

. . . every woman
her natural enemy
. . . every man
her potential lover

By CARL CORLEY

ATTALA ROSE

by

Carl V. Corley

All characters and situations in this
book are fictitious

A PEC CLASSIC

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Chapter One

I will come to remember, like a Nun with her rosary, or like the emerald glass beads on the neck of a prostitute, the endless Southern sex cities strung from Miami to New Orleans ... cities alive only during the gory makeshift of night, cities throbbing with miles of neon tubes, blinking, rosy colored ... like sex itself ... blind, with their million multicolored eyes scaring away the darkness ... and loneliness ... that forever *hollow* loneliness.

I will come to remember too the medicine of blaring juke-boxes, of cheap jazz bands, of banjos and horns and sultry voices singing sex numbers, curing what ails you then making you ill again ... will remember rooms, like dark sinister caves, hung from the walls of concrete caverns, and dirty beds, and arms and legs ... legs chafing my soft flesh with coarse black hair, and cigarette breath thick with whiskey, and pretty words, and moans ... like an animal ... and sobs, drunken, lonely sobs.

I will come to remember too men who smell of brilliantine and cologne, clean shaven men, men in shiny tweeds, men in levis, men in swanky suits by

Preston and Wallace, men in Ban-Lon holiday knits, and men in black Cabretta leather, with epaulettes, men in bathing trunks, their bronze muscles gleaming in the sun along Lake Pontchartrain, along Highway Ninety at the Gulf of Mexico, trunks of bright orange and yellow . . . satin sheaths around lava colored loins . . . of terry cloth, making their thighs glowingly warm, men with the surf in their hair, sand, sun bleached, touseled by dry southern winds, broad shoulders red as crabs, men pale, unshaven, emmaciated, men coughing and spitting, their lungs rotten from tobacco and T. B., men, sex hungry, filling their desperate needs on whatever flesh that is available to them, and warm, men with groping hands and groping tongues, sex on their lips . . . and all of them in that long endless necklace of glass beads, about my neck, choking, stifling my dreams, taking me out of myself, robbing me of all that is precious to any being, male or female . . . the privilege to be yourself.

And I will remember too where it all began; not in those dingy, smelly rooms, not on the beach, not in some palatial mansion along Tulane Avenue or Metairie Road, but in a dog trot house in the red hills of Mississippi.

There was where it all began: I was so young then, not quite in my teens yet. There was a wind and rainstorm, lightning flashed like a broken electric cable, and dark clouds rode herd on the nervous sky. My stallion was loose, breaking the barn lot fence and bounding off down the pasture lane at the first clap of thunder, and I went out into the rain after him, my mother and father calling to me from the kitchen door. As I ran down the lane, between the two rows of pear trees on each side of the fence, the wind was reaping them like corn. Leaves whirled, as if in a caldron, and the limbs in the rumbling sycamores and birchtops turned white bellies to the dark, frightful sky. I found

Cisco lying in a ditch, entangled in barbed wire, his dark, liquid eyes glaring, with dumb terror, as I ran up to him. He was smeared with blood, it running, discolored with the onslaught of rain, and looked drenched in pain. He lay on one side, his left leg histed up by the taut strung wire, and for an instant of stark terror I saw a glimpse of his organ, now ripped its great enormous length, blood gushing out in a series of wild streams, bathing his genitals in red.

I stood there in the wild rain, petrified yet awed by that pitiful, but astounding sight, unable to move. In that same instant Cisco's gallant head swung round to face me, and his huge dark eyes, so pleading, so naked with pain, found mine, and I saw and sensed the two in a unison with my awe ... awe and pity, and a deep selfless longing to help him. The picture of my stallion, wounded, us close together in the storm, helpless as babes, his maleness torn by the merciless wire, the blood, the terror, fixed itself permanently in my brain, stamped the savage image that was to alter and dictate to my life ... though I did not realize it then, not even the meaning of it ... that would in time shape my relationship with men ... all men ... men, like the horse I pitied, who would come to use me for a gratification I would never wholly understand, simply because, like the wounded stallion, I would move in an inner glory to help them, to ease their pain with my own.

Not that they had felt pain ... like Cisco had felt pain ... but because Cisco was male and they were male I weakened under the image of that power, my mind seeing and feeling the agony of their torn desires and in turn loving them, as I had Cisco, for that agony.

Papa shot the stallion and, with his huge long arm about me, led me through the grey downpour of rain to the house, where I ran to my room and refused to come out. I stood at the window, brooding, watching with a sad heart as the rain lashed at the panes, making the house look as if it lay beneath the tides, gnawed at my young heart with my sad memory of my dead pet lying out in the rain, and mingled with my reprieve the awesome, yet wondrous picture of him, there dappled in his own blood.

Cisco lay dead: there was a dark blight on my heart and then, only twelve, approaching my teens, my young brain etched with this horrid, yet fascinating image, my senses become a treadmill. I turn from my window and go to my mother who is in the kitchen preparing supper. I always loved to sit in the kitchen under the old oil lamp and watch her rolling out the clean white dough on the wooden board, see the biscuits swell in the wood stove, smell their aroma, listen as she turned the crank on the coffee grinder that hung on the wall, and smell the coffee beans parching, and the smoked ham frying. I asked her if Cisco was dead (the stallion was already dead and I knew this, but I still asked, numbed with grief).

Without turning from her biscuit dough, she said:

"Tala, you know the horse is dead ... why ask? Why bother me by asking? You know Oliver shot him in the woods, in the rain, where it got tangled up in the wire ... no more good to any of us."

I could not comprehend why papa had to shoot him.

"He would have lived," I cry, persistent.

"But lame," Mama says dryly, blowing a lock of dark hair from off her forehead. "Do you want a lame horse, Tala? Now do you?"

She sounded so final, so fatal.

"Will Cisco go to heaven?" I cry out in dumb protest, hoping for the next best thing for my pet animal.

Mama does not even favor me with a glance.

"It will rot ... in the dirt, like your kitten last spring."

I am aghast.

"But Cisco has a soul!"

"All animals in conversation, yes," Mama said. "But any single animal in reality is only an animal, and animals have no souls."

She did not say this cruelly. There was no cruelty in my mother. She merely spoke within the realm of her own limited reasoning, and in a way hopeful of soothing me. And she adds: "The red mare is due to foal, and I'll speak to Oliver. Wouldn't you like a colt, dear?"

I think of Cisco tangled in the sharp wire, his dark liquid eyes peering up at me, his body quivering, his fine coat stained with blood. And I blurt out: "I want Cisco, Mama! Why did he have to die?"

She glances at me in irritation, beads of perspiration moist on her cheeks, her kind face lit with crimson as she throws a stick of wood in the stove. The flames shoot out, like a miniature hell, which punctuates the situation. Rain drives on the panes, and a limb of a live oak outside rakes the walls like sharp claws.

"Everything has to die ... sooner or later," she laments. "The horses, the cows, Oliver ... yes Oliver too (she says this very slowly) and me ... and you too, Tala, and you have to bear up to it, to pray when your time comes." She turns then and gazes at me, a long thoughtful gaze that goes to the back of my mind. "May God make it easy for you, Tala, when your time comes ... like when you go to sleep and never wake up."

So death was going to sleep and never waking. How wrong Mama was! Later, I learned that Mama was wrong about a lot of things, especially things concerning me, but not intentionally wrong, not through her ignorance, but through her love for me.

Mama possessed the kindest of hearts or, a crushing tenderness for all life, whether it be animal or human.

There were dark places in her soul, a strangeness which made me feel sorry for her, an inferior quality which made one think, who knew her, that she was forever unable to defend herself from the brutal callousness of the world . . . that world I was to come to know later.

Too, she was a melancholic. She brooded. She fancied. She gloomed. She allowed her emotions to run rampant, to overrule her logic. Too, like Papa often said, she dreamed. It made you love her all the more, this sad lost part of her, this tenor of her being no one would ever know except herself, as if you were being purposefully left out of this part of her life, something she shared only with herself, something she kept secret, locked away from the world.

Even in those times, when I was still a fledgling girl, I realized that her secretive abandonement was mostly Papa's fault. We lived in the hill country of Attala County, Mississippi, where farm houses were miles apart, and towns and villages, places so remote to us as to be non-existent. Mama loved people, especially her many sisters and brothers, my cousins, church gatherings, and she was left out of life, somehow, as a flower is left out of a garden, but grows still on its borders, our nearest neighbor being over three miles away, and with rarely if ever a visitor calling except the preacher occasionally, and some of my aunts and uncles during County fair time.

Now and then a lone rider on a lathered horse, traveling cross country, would stay the night over in Papa's barn, or a Salesman in a rickety old car peddling vanilla extract, salves, horse and cow liniment, cold creams, cheap perfume, magazines, bolts of cloth, ribbon and thread. Mama always bought the magazines, usually the Harper's Bazaar and the Silver Screen, saving her egg money for that purpose, or swapping vegetables from the garden or fruit from our orchard, or honey from Papa's hives for them. I remember how she would rush through her daily chores once she got her hands on these precious articles, anxious for the time when she could retreat to some quiet place, usually in the front porch swing, or out under an oak tree in the yard to read them aloud to me, and to thumb through the numerous colorful pictures of beautiful dresses and faces of her favorite movie stars. They were her passport to the outside world, or, to any world for that matter, and she kept each edition stacked neatly beneath a table in the hall, where she could conveniently get to them whenever a minute or two of leisure took her away from the farm duties. Sometimes she would tuck a late copy into the pocket of her apron, stealing a glance between peeling potatoes, watching after the corn bread in the oven, between intervals of stirring a skillet of fresh corn, while she churned, while she waited for the coffee grounds to parch, while she boiled eggs for salad. Gems to her, they took her out of the drabness of the farm, into that other world denied her, but which I would come to know in time.

Though she dreamed, though she lived and partly existed in some other medium of existence .. an existence Papa and I could never enter, she was not lazy. She never shirked even the most infinite duty. Papa and I often wondered how she did it. We never saw her hurried or busy, yet the proofs of her industry were there on our farm. She worked like the coral insect, in the dark, as it were, of instinct unlit by intellect, and, like the coral insect, she raised a monumental structure that hemmed her in. Like in the storeroom at the rear of the kitchen, a dim place where ivy leaves scraped the cobwebby window, tall green canisters stood on shelves in company with glass jars, neatly labelled, and barrels of homemade pickles, where hams hung darkly from the smoky ceiling, and dried onions and peppers in bunches, and bins of dried apples, peanuts, and every jelly and jam one could name.

Her work was like her love . . . enormous . . . and her strangeness, her long periods of silence, her preoccupations with servitude and solitude made me love her a hundredfold in return, and my childhood was filled, like a cup overflowing, with the warm honey of her devotion. With her emptiness she filled mine: all that other women would have put into their prayers she gave to me, all the sad things she could not say, the dark abodings, the golden light which lit the darkest places within me, the sealed genius, the song which she could never sing, the unwritten poetry, flinging, as from a life she neither wanted nor valued, into my eager, outstretched arms. She was as selfless as a saint, and lived up to the essence of her creed as very few saints have done, sacrificing her life in hard labor and servitude for the family she adored little less than she adored God.

Coarse, Gypsy dark, with a mane of black hair streaming down her shoulders, standing in the opened doorway looking longingly into nowhere, rapt in that half-world, she became in time to me to be that madonna woman personified, wisdom, justice, all that all women should be, and which I yearned to be desperately, but never could. She was all the things I craved to be, kind, considerate, loyal, a great lady, even in her simple Mother Hubbard clothes, her starched white apron, which smelled of cedar, her Indian moccasins which she wore indoors. I used to help her dress on Sundays for church, a chore I loved, watching her slip into her only go-to-meeting dress, a black silk which rustled when she walked, and a wide brimmed black lace hat with a pink chiffon rose on top. And the way she smelled, of palmolive soap, lilac talcum powder, and verbena sachet. It seemed to take hours for her to prepare herself for any outing, bathing in an old aluminum tub, heating water on the kitchen stove, then a ritual of powdering, brushing her long dark hair with the comb and brush of ivory, then slippers, and purse, and flowing embroidered handkerchief, and black gloves. But in an emergency, visiting someone who was gravely ill, or when there was an accident, she could turn out her toilet in amazing short order, and always with every hair in place, every buttoned sleeve and blouse looped, with her placid face shining from soap and water.

Everything she did, everything she said, seemed to have more importance than what she did or what she said, as if she placed infinite importance upon her every word and act, giving to them a special meaning, when there was no special meaning. Like the name she gave me . . . Attala . . . because I was born in Attala county Mississippi, and which seemed to be appropriate for our family name, which was . . . Rose. Though, from a fledgling girl, I was referred by no other idiom than Tala. Our German police dog she named Bruno, and every flower in our front yard, yielded out of the hard red clay, having lost all their names except the country ones, she pinned special titles. The dogwood were "crosses of Jesus", the cowslips were "keys to Heaven," and the Maypop blossom, all lavender and white and rich with tiny bits of buttered gold, contained a complete assemblage of Christ's agony, the cross, the thorns, the spikes, even the spread halo of his ascension.

But I use to enjoy all these make-believe objects nature made into miniatures of life, the wonderful things she could draw out of nature and fit to history, or to God, and we would sit at times, when the weather was warm, out in the thick clover and look to the far hills. Then, the wind driven buttercups would steal into your heart; and the wide clean whiteness of the sky, like her freshly washed sheets on the line, would blow over us, cleaning us, like spring water over a lily, and the big black bees, whizzing by our heads so swift they made long black threads in their flight, startled you with a shout: and Mama would get into one of her inspirational spells, and she would explain to me how things should be with a girl growing up, and her eyes then, gazing into mine, had such a bright power in them, such a steadfast glow, as if nothing could blow them out, and I would say then: "Mama, why can't things stay like they are? Why do I ever have to grow up? I'm happy as it is . . . with you."

Then, she would give me a fierce hug, press back my long hair, and say proud like, as if she was glad she had past on from my age to hers.

"Tala, child, You can't always stay happy. You have to grow up and take the misery what comes."

I did not know what she meant then. I do now. The sudden loss of childhood. The terrible loss of innocence.

Those were the times of my childhood that I remember most ... being with her, listening to her advice, drawing from her wounds the new fortications I would need in time to face life. If that helped me. Looking back ... seeing, feeling her awesome tenderness ... I only weaken, and going on is all the more difficult.

I see now so much I should have done because of her, because of her simple, wholesome goodness, things I never did, but wanted to. I saw how right she was ... like she was right about Cisco.

I was deeply religious then. I prayed nightly. Like I prayed desperately for Cisco. God would make an exception. He would let my stallion into Heaven.

I take flowers to put on his grave. The sun is out, hot against the still trees, against the little winding path down through the pasture. Papa's cows lie under the shade of the oaks slapping their tails to ward off the droning flies. Then I smell the dead flesh of Cisco as it oozies up from the hot dry dirt.

I know now that at sometime at that moment, there in my childhood, the seeds of restlessness were planted within me.

Cisco was my first loss. But there would be others out of my childhood ... many more that would shape my destiny.

When I was thirteen ... that was 1936 ... Papa sent me to the little town of Ethel to buy some wire frames for him to make funeral wreaths. He made both wreaths and coffins then, the spare wood from the coffins he made into bee hives, and old man Cunningham, down by the river, had died, and his sister wanted Papa to make his coffin.

I always hated funerals. Sometimes Papa took on the job of bathing and dressing the corpse, with Mama helping, and I usually went along to do whatever I could. In these parts funeral parlors were practically unheard of, and the corpses were prepared for burial in the home where they had lived. Once I helped Mama put gloves on the dead hands of Mrs. Moorhead, a frail, emaciated woman who made her living on a chicken farm. Her hands had remained limber, and it was like trying to put silk hose on an octopus. Afterwards I believed they had buried her alive, so desperately she fought death. Once, while Mama was bathing her, I thought I saw her move, and I let out a terrified shriek.

"It's the living you should fear, child," said one of the family mourners, who came into the room to see what had happened. "And not the dead."

Mama looked at me then, a troublesome look, and shook her head from side to side very slowly.

"Maybe I'm doing the wrong thing," she murmurs. "Maybe you're too young to be seeing what you're seeing, grown folks dead, naked. Maybe you're too young."

Now, I know I was too young. I was too young to go to Ethel also, alone, on horseback, and through weeded field roads and woods. I was to stay with Mama's sister, Aunt Pauline. I am overjoyed. Aunt Pauline had only one child (Uncle Rafe was dead), a son a year or two older than I, named Joel.

I go through the browning woods, the vacant, dead stubble fields, for it is fall now, the cotton already picked, straggling white puffs dotting the dead stalks, at a steady gallop. The sky hangs over my wind driven head like a mourning shroud. A chill is on the air, boding a first snow. I want to reach Ethel and Aunt Pauline's house by nightfall. Fear is not in me. I am of the physical. It is those of the spirit who fear.

Aunt Pauline, thrifty, shrewd beyond all common logic . . . typical of the Black Dutch, is none too pleased to see me. Once she had called me a high spirited girl . . . fresh . . . who'd get picked up! She was also jealous of her son, whom she coddled . . . in memory of Uncle Rafe.

Joel had bright, hot eyes, a head of russet tasseled hair, a ready smile, and he gloated in teasing girls. Though I was his cousin he made no exceptions.

"You're jam! Attala Rose," he praises, as we three sat round the supper table, the enormous oil lamp with hand painted flowers spraying our faces with gold. "Jam! Jam!"

"You mean preserves, Joel," Aunt Pauline cries, raspingly. "Haven't I always taught you to say preserves?"

She is not pleading against the inelegant word, I notice, but against me.

When supper is over I help Aunt Pauline wash up, and all the while anxious for her to ask me to stay the night over. She says nothing. Outside, it is already getting dark, and the street lamps along the main street in Ethel glow like yellow blobs in the cold blackness. We retire to the living room, and she still says nothing.

My anxiety is acute now, and I look from the warm, cozy room, which seems so protective, to the dreaded darkness outside. I see a clear picture of me astride Dusty going back home through those lonely woods, through those desolate field lanes, and I all but panic. I began to fidget.

"You look like an actress," she finally says, her curious eyes going over me. "Quick to blossom, and early to die . . . is what I say."

I thank her for her praise, though this does little to calm my nerves.

"You'll stray for sure, Attala," she continues. "Just like my neice Georgia Belle. You're growing up too quick."

"Can I help it, Auntie?" I reply, waiting to say a lot more to her, cutting things, but I could not afford to anger her at the moment.

"You sit too high, child," she goes on, heedlessly, her chin tilted hatefully. "Causes men to stare."

"I like for men to stare," I say spitefully, tossing my head until my long hair fanned out over my shoulders.

"Oh! My," she rasps, a hand going to her mouth. "What would Hazel say . . . coming from her own daughter?"

"She'd say nothing," I whisper mockingly. "Mama knows I'm attractive to men. Eat in company but sleep alone . . . she says."

"Well . . . I should think so!" she cries, as if appalled. "Hazel should be giving you more advice, especially about men. Men do not like forward girls."

I giggle.

"Oh, Auntie! Of course they do."

"But they don't marry them," she concludes, triumphantly.

"I'm never going to marry anyway," I say, as if by those few words I settle my whole life.

"All girls should get married."

"Not me. I'm going to stay free, like I was born, and go where I please and do what I please."

"Oh . . . my . . . Miss proud in the flesh. Pride comes before a fall. Girls who gad about never turn out to be much. You should do like me and your mama Hazel. Find some strong young man who has a head on his shoulders, and can make you a decent honest living."

"Not me, Auntie," I protest, looking her squarely in the eyes. I think woefully of Mama in her bondage, worked to death, her sad beauty fading daily before my watchful eyes. "I'm not going to work on some one mule farm all my life, break my back in the fields. I'm not . . ."

"You're not going to do what?" asks Joel, coming into the room. He is dressed, ready to go out, and he looks like a picture ad, his eyes fairly dancing in the low lamp light, his curly head shining like new corn. He takes my hand and lifts me up from the couch.

I repeated to him what I had said to his mother about my never marrying.

"What a waste that would be," he jibes, glancing at me with a hearty smile, then to Aunt Pauline.

"Joel!" she corrects him. "You talk like Attala is something to be used, like she will spoil if she is not."

"She would spoil," he persists. Playfully, he pulls my hair. We both giggle, and all under Aunt Pauline's watchful eyes. She goes into the kitchen and soon returns with coffee and chocolate layer cake.

"I can't stay," Joel says, glancing at the food. "I'm going out."

"In the middle of the week . . . pray tell?"

There is a protective tone in her every word.

"There is a tent burly-q-show in town," he answers her, then turns his attention on me. His eyes sparkle. "Wanna come with me?"

I am elated with joy. I had never seen one of those traveling tent shows and I had always been avidly curious about them, especially after Holly Monroe, my school year friend, had related to me in detail one she had seen during a trip to Jackson. But before I can say yes Aunt Pauline steps in.

"It would make her too late starting home," she says dry like, but as though she has my interest at heart.

Joel glares at her, his mouth a round O.

"But, Mother, Attala's staying the night over."

Aunt Pauline answers with tongue in cheek, all the while busy at pouring the coffee, fumbling with the embroidered napkins.

"Hazel would be worried. If she starts quick she'll be home fore midnight."

"But, Mother! Aunt Hazel would sure be a heap more worried if she knew Attala was out on a night like this, and in this weather, It is fixin' to snow!"

Aunt Pauline looks at me, her face a bland mask.

"Attala ain't feared of the dark . . . are you?"

At that instant I hate, hate her. And I am not easy to hate. I see the long, lonely road through the cold darkness. She is putting me out of the haven that is her home, its warmth, its friendliness . . . the friendliness of Joel, the huge fire crackling in the hearth, the fine clean china cups reflecting the light, and into the cold among strangers, Mama's own sister, her own flesh and blood.

On later times . . . times when my life, what I became, was discussed, I blamed Papa for sending me to Ethel to buy funeral wreaths, said that he should have gone himself, it being a man's task, and even at times I blamed Mama, who let him send me. But it was aunt Pauline, and Aunt Pauline alone who set my feet upon that dark road that night, which led to my shadowy ending.

I stand in the middle of the living room, weak at the knees, my eyes wide, unable to speak. I stare at Joel then to Aunt Pauline, who gives me a sheepish look, then back to Joel, whose eyes now have lost their wild twinkle. There is pain in them, and the sight of them mingles with my sudden fears.

"She can have my room," he suggests. "I'll take the couch."

Aunt Pauline refuses to look at us.

"It's not fittin' for a girl," is all she can answer, the poorest of all excuses, as if she is concerned for my age and my privacy. "A girl shouldn't sleep in a room that belongs to a boy. It's not decent . . . like you were both in there together."

"Mother!"

"Never will we!" I half-shout, stung by her accusation.

She realizes her error in speech. A hand goes to her heart.

"I mean, I mean . . . like you were married."

I become a small fury.

"How could we be married . . . and us first cousins?"

"And me so much older in the bargain," Joel puts in.

Aunt Pauline rattles the coffee cups. She is outnumbered, and defeat cries from her every bone, her mountain of flesh there on the rose-patterned couch.

"Do you take cream and sugar?" she asks, stern even in her failure to triumph.

"Everything!" I answer, not really wanting anything at all.

She gives me a cold, relentless gaze.

"Everything!" she says. "That's you, Attala Rose. You want everything in life. Sugar . . . cream . . . everything!"

I wanted, and with a passion, to slap the shiny cup from her outstretched hand. Instead, thinking of

Mama, I take the cup of coffee as politely as I can and sip at it sparingly. The cup trembles in my clammy fingers. The coffee sloshes over into the saucer. I dread the long ride home in the dark. Desperate, I all but beg her on bending knee to let me stay the night over, but something of pride, of self discipline, of obeying Mama . . . not to stay unless I am invited, stiffens my spine and lends me courage I do not realize I possess.

There is no use to linger. Aunt Pauline's steady eyes on me tells me she has barred the door, that she will tolerate no foolishness between me and her precious Joel. She must save him, even if I am to be destroyed.

One's Gods must at all hazards go clear of blame.

"I've got to go," I manage to say, though I know my voice is trembling. I set the half-drunk coffee on the cigarette table.

Joel makes another daring suggestion.

"Let her have your room then, Mother?"

Aunt Pauline swells up like a toad. She plays her trump-card.

"Little I thought, Joel, that so soon after Rafe died you'd be so thoughtless of my comforts. As long as I live my room's mine. When I am dead and gone . . . when I am buried side Rafe, and God knows, that won't be too soon, you can have what's mine, and can bring any trollop here you want to to sleep . . ."

"Mother!" Joel interrupted.

I go to the door. Joel follows. We stand for a moment in the cold darkness looking at one another. He takes my hand.

"I'm sorry," he mutters.

He helps me into the saddle. I lean over and kiss him on the cheek, then I spur Dusty to a fast gallop, and we hurry down the main street of Ethel, past the square with the courthouse, its row of luminous columns gleaming beyond the street-lamps, past the tall statue of a Confederate soldier with his rifle, then beyond the exit of Ethel itself, where dark trees loom largely, and the black shapes of houses, some with lighted windows, some completely dark, their glass panes like blind eyes watching me as I pass, and into a tunnel of huge cedars which arch up and over the road like church windows.

Here, I slow my pace, allowing Dusty to pick his way through the immense shadows, and purposely to lighten the sound of his hoofs on the hard gravel road. The wind goes before us, like a lost dog whimpering. The sky is casket gray, continuous, like a slate board. And once beyond the tunnel of cedars the snow begans to fall. It sprinkles down on the magnolia leaves and onto the fence posts like sugar.

The wreath frames sag on my arm, and I shift them to the other. I have passed the last street-lamp now, and the houses, getting fewer, seem darker, more desolate, as if they are vacant, and I began to whimper.

Finally, with the falling of the snow, the white blanket over the gardens and yards, over the stretches of pasture, everything become more visible, faint, but still visible, the hills, the valleys, the houses and barns making themselves known, and I take courage in this.

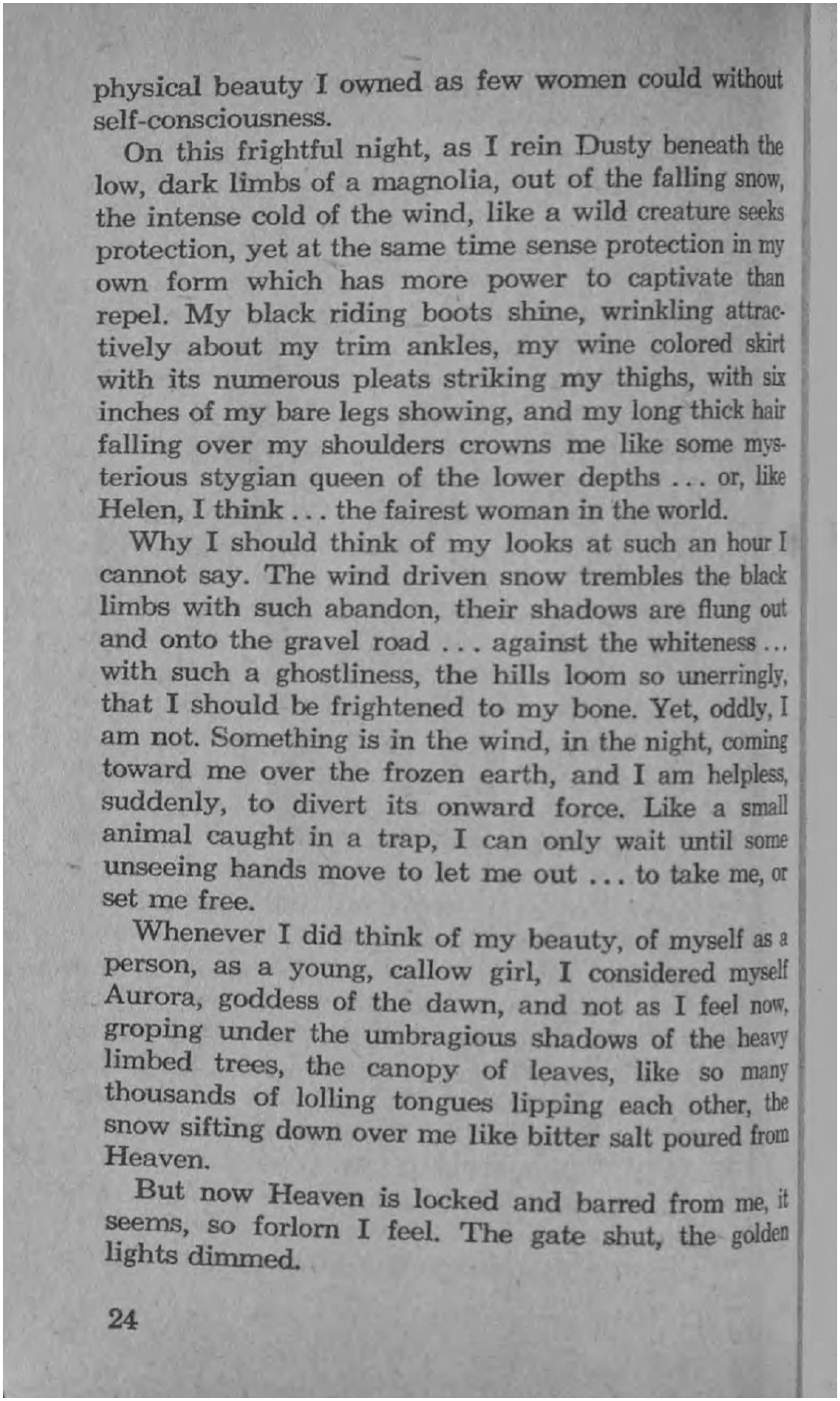
I had always loved the out-of-doors, in vast measures of my life, had been brought up in it, and I was at home in the woods, the fields, the pasture, knowing every inch of Papa's property, which was as familiar to me as my own mind. I had ridden horseback since I was three, had helped with the work in the fields, could climb a tree or throw a rock or shoot a rifle better than most of the rural boys, and could out swim any of them. Yet, this night I was, somehow afraid, and of something I could not understand nor name.

At thirteen I was mature, and I was acutely aware of this maturity, as are most southern girls reared in the country, and fortified to country ways. In a land swarming with men, teeming with sex, mature girls are born with a watchful eye, and I was no exception.

My figure was in full blossom, though I was small, petite, only five feet in my bare feet and tipping the cotton scales at one hundred and twenty pounds. My legs were plump, shapely, and my breasts were rounded and firm, and, unlike many girls my age and beyond at school, I did not have to sew lace padding in my brassiere, nor stuff the upper portion with cotton wadding to give them lift. Too, my complexion was good, without blemish from daily use of good soap and water, and I was wholesome, reared on good solid country food, fresh milk, and fruit in season. I had my mother's eyes . . . strange, emerald eyes, like great depths of clear water, and in their large clear irises were tawny flecks, like diamond chips. My hair too, though of a darker, richer coloring than Mama's, was tawny and auburn on the ends, and my ways were like hers . . . graceful, covert as a wild creature's.

Though I was an only child, I had never been catered to nor was I spoiled, and I had never gone through that awkward age, nor that shy nor mixed-up phase so many girls went through and never quite outgrew. That I was a tom-boy was obvious, because of my joy in competing with the rural boys in tough games and sports, and my love for the woods, the out of doors, but I could be feminine when I dared, and I learned what I knew about make-up and prettying myself from Mama, who knew secrets about charms she never passed on to other women.

My eyebrows were naturally arched, like a bird's wings in mid-flight, my lashes were long, curling and dark, and the overall of my face, my small bone structure had that cameo cut, that profile coveted and envied by so many other girls my age and beyond. Not that I was beautiful . . . as an actress is beautiful, or a marble statue . . . but beautiful as a thing born of the wilds, unconscious of beauty, wearing the natural



physical beauty I owned as few women could without self-consciousness.

On this frightful night, as I rein Dusty beneath the low, dark limbs of a magnolia, out of the falling snow, the intense cold of the wind, like a wild creature seeks protection, yet at the same time sense protection in my own form which has more power to captivate than repel. My black riding boots shine, wrinkling attractively about my trim ankles, my wine colored skirt with its numerous pleats striking my thighs, with six inches of my bare legs showing, and my long thick hair falling over my shoulders crowns me like some mysterious stygian queen of the lower depths . . . or, like Helen, I think . . . the fairest woman in the world.

Why I should think of my looks at such an hour I cannot say. The wind driven snow trembles the black limbs with such abandon, their shadows are flung out and onto the gravel road . . . against the whiteness . . . with such a ghostliness, the hills loom so unerringly, that I should be frightened to my bone. Yet, oddly, I am not. Something is in the wind, in the night, coming toward me over the frozen earth, and I am helpless, suddenly, to divert its onward force. Like a small animal caught in a trap, I can only wait until some unseeing hands move to let me out . . . to take me, or set me free.

Whenever I did think of my beauty, of myself as a person, as a young, callow girl, I considered myself Aurora, goddess of the dawn, and not as I feel now, groping under the umbragious shadows of the heavy limbed trees, the canopy of leaves, like so many thousands of lolling tongues lipping each other, the snow sifting down over me like bitter salt poured from Heaven.

But now Heaven is locked and barred from me, it seems, so forlorn I feel. The gate shut, the golden lights dimmed.

I hear the sound of a horse's hoofs.

A lump leaps to my throat.

It is coming by way of Ethel, along the same road I am on, and at a terrific gallop. It becomes a loud clatter in my alert ears, like the only sound in a dead world, and sudden terror races to my heart like a living flame.

"Whoever it is, they're in a hurry," I mutter to myself, half in voice and half out, as I guide Dusty into deeper shadows.

I am too late. The rider sees me, and pulls in, his horse, a huge bay, scattering loose gravel and snow.

"Well . . . am I in luck!" a voice says, deep guttural, confident, and this frightens me anew. "A babe in the woods! Just sitting here in the cold, ripe for the taking."

Mama had schooled me in the ways of men, reckless men, but all her timely words were not the right ones to help a girl in such an hour. The smell of whiskey warmed the cold air around me, and I realize if I am to save myself I must take the course of action. The heel of my boots rakes my horse's flanks, I lash wildly with the reins, and Dusty leaps forward as if on springs.

There is a clatter of hoofs, as both horses tear down the road.

"My God! Am I seeing ghosts," his voice cried out behind me. "Or are you a real girl?"

His big bay gains on Dusty. Through my tangled hair I see a blur of the man reach out and grab the reins. We come to a sudden halt in the middle of the road. With lightening quick instinct, I fling the funeral wreaths out in a full arch. They strike him full across the face.

He is stung, but he keeps his balance.

"Good God, girl! What ails you?" he cries hoarsely, dabbing at his face.

"I'm not for the taking!" I shout back, the sound of my shrill voice ringing in the still, cold night. My breasts heave, as if I am out of breath, but it is fear, outrageous fear.

"I only want to help you, girl," he says, which does little to win my confidence. "Way out here in the middle of the night . . . alone . . . where you going?"

Surprisingly, I tell him.

"Why, that's almost to Kosciusko," he advises, as if he takes me for a stranger in these parts. "You'll be after midnight."

"I'm not afraid of the dark," I say, keeping my voice steady. And add cuttingly: "Or no man!"

He laughs.

"If only I wasn't a gentleman."

"No man's a gentleman . . . when he's liquored up," I say, trying to sound experienced. Actually, I had never seen a man drunk, except Grandpa Rose, but I recognized the smell, and that was enough for me. I jerk at the reins. "Now, turn my horse loose . . . or else!"

He is amused.

"Or else . . . what?"

Momentarily I am at a loss for words.

Or else I'll scream!"

"Who would hear you? There's not a house in miles."

I am truly terrified now, not only from the sound of his mocking voice, which has a note of confidence in it, but of what he has said. My eyes quickly glance round. There isn't a house in sight.

"You touch me and Papa'll kill you," I manage to cry, lending my last bulwark of defense, as my eyes, even in the darkness, stare his down.

"I wouldn't harm you, girl," he whispers, his voice calm, magical. My words seemed to have an effect on him. "Nor am I drunk. Went to that burlesque show, took one drink with old man Stubblefield. Live about a mile down the road . . . at the Sub Rosa plantation.

Ever heard of it?"

"Should I have?" I ask back, my head held high, maintaining a courage I was far from feeling. Yet, I had heard of the place. It was one of those ante-bellum homes, built years before the Civil War, one of the rarest of its kind in this section of Mississippi. I had seen it only on occasion, for it sat on a hill back off the main road, and was half hidden in a wild growth of oaks and magnolias choked with moss, its columns and tall shuttered windows peering out from the foam of deep green. Mysterious, forlorn, steeped in melancholy, the memory of it makes this man beside me seem mysterious too, a part of the ancient, yet enchanted in a way, as the house and grounds were enchanted to me, and this stirs me with a fear and a sensation I can neither understand nor overcome. That he is from this house. a house whose history is as fascinating at it is beautiful, eases somehow my stark terror of him, and for the first time I truly look at him . . . really see him.

There in the dark road, beyond the black maw of the overhanging tree limbs, the luminous light of the sky . . . pregnant with snow . . . illuminating his face, I see a handsomeness which stirs within me, as with perhaps all females, admiration and trust, and a desire to know what lies behind his savagely comely face, beyond the mind's reach of his crystal clear eyes on me, what dark secrets lie in his heart. His hair is black, raven black, and lies smoothly over his wide set brow, as straight as an Indian's, and ends at a point at the nape of his neck. Though not seemingly very tall (it is difficult to tell the height of a man in the saddle, for all men are magnificent on horseback) but his shoulders loom broadly, his thighs are thick with saddle muscles, and he holds the reins with firm, capable hands, hands that let you know they can touch you gently or tear you to shreds.

Gazing at him with a little less hostility now . . . now that I see the man behind my terror, I say again:

"Should I have ever heard of your place . . . Sub Rosa?"

"Most everyone has who has ever lived in these parts," he answers, his voice low, calm. He does not take his eyes from mine. "But it's not Sub Rosa anymore, not since Grandfather Tamblyn took it over." He smiles proudly, his teeth shining like ice. "He changed the name to Oakleigh . . . been called that ever since."

"I've heard Papa mention the name Tamblyn before," I whisper.

"My name's Swain Tamblyn . . . what's yours?"

Oddly, I tell him, but with a protective instinct omit my maiden name.

"Just Attala . . . eh?" he grunts, as if in disbelief. "Well, that's good enough for me, Attala. There's not many girls in these parts, or all of Mississippi for that matter named after an Indian princess."

I give him a look of complete surprise.

You mean . . . I'm named after a princess?"

"The daughter of a Choctaw Chief, one of the most famous names in Mississippi history . . . except Kosciusko, but he wasn't an Indian."

"What was he then?" I ask in ignorance, my fear completely vanished. I knew little of my native state's history and less about the Indians, mainly, because the past did not interest me.

He answers: "A Czechoslovakian."

"I've never heard," I say, and with frankness.

"I love history," he laments, and the way he says it makes me certain he is speaking the truth. "My most interesting subject at college."

"Oh, you go to college?" I somehow feel an air of importance talking to a college student, someone so mature, so dashingly masculine. I attempt to arrange my wind blown hair with cold fingers.

He leans recklessly in the saddle.

"One more year at Mississippi State."

"Isn't that a military college?"

"Well, we wear uniforms, if that's what you mean."

I feel my face flush.

"Oh."

"You don't have to feel bad about it," he murmurs, his dark face near mine. "Most people make that mistake . . . think we are training for war, or something like that. Besides, you're yet so young . . . and pretty, and pretty heads should not be troubled by such harsh, unpleasant subjects."

"I'm a woman grown!" I blurt out, my pride instantly stung. I did not know why, but I wanted him to think me more his age . . . the college age.

He laughs. This stings more than his words. There is something of such demanding power within him, as though I have known him a long time, and not for but a few minutes in this wild, snow laden country.

"What grade you in, Attala?" he teases, dimples showing maddeningly on each side of his lips.

I look away into the icy darkness.

"The ninth."

"Just the ninth? Attala, can you prove you're a woman grown?"

His face is very close now, and I feel his warm breath over my frozen face, the hint of liquor now like perfume.

"How?" I cry meekly, my voice a tremor.

"You could come with me to Oakleigh . . . stay the night."

My back stiffens.

"Have you lost your mind?"

I grab hold of my horse's reins, give a frenzied click.

"Ah, hold on," he says, spurring his horse up to mine. "Don't go jumping to conclusions. I don't mean nothing by it. It's just that . . . here we are, both fools sitting here in the dark and the cold, when we could be up at Oakleigh right now, comfortable, getting—getting acquainted."

I lash out.

"Getting acquainted how?"

"Oh, just talking, about school, anything, getting to know each other. I want to know you, Attala, really I do."

"You do?" I stammer, battling my most precious reserves.

"Of course I do." He lays a hand on the pommel of my saddle. "And you want to know me too. I knew that the minute you first looked at me."

Had it shown that much?

"I've never seen you, till tonight." I deny everything, betraying my emotions, my emotions which have, as quickly, betrayed me.

"Just the same," he says, and so cock sure. "You know and I know . . . just like that." He snaps his fingers. "Know we gotta see each other."

"I don't know any such thing," I cry, trying to sound infuriated at his forwardness. "Besides," I lie. "I already have a boy friend."

He laughs a mocking laugh.

"And I have many . . . many girlfriends. Yet," and he leans so dangerously close. "Yet, Attala, I have to know you. I've just gotta!"

"I'm going home," I murmur, clicking to Dusty.

"Please!" he cries out, after me. The sound is like the wail of the Banshee on my shoulder. But I am unwary if it is a bless or curse. I am drawn to him by something I cannot understand, yet pulled away from him by something of my own logic, the warning sound of Mama's voice in my ears, my wayward heart.

"Come to Oakleigh with me, Attala, freely, I'd not harm you. Never would I!"

I go on. His pleading voice pulls at every fiber of my youth, everything that is vital, wistful within me.

His pleading is so desperate, so boyish a cry, I long that he take me, long to comfort the wildness that claws within him.

I trump up an excuse.

"What would your Mother and Father think?"

"They're dead," he cries, and in a coarse, harsh cry, almost brutal, as if he has no regrets for their passing. "It's just me and Wroten, my Father's house servant. But you'd be safe."

Ah! I'd be safe!

Alone . . . in that huge house with two men!

Yet, in my girlish curiosity, I longed to set foot beyond those great walls, into those ancient and lovely rooms. But Mama's voice rushes against my nerves like the voice to Moses on the mountain.

"I could take you!" he blurts out then, as we ride side by side through this awesome, but magical night, and the sound in his voice, embittered, turns me cold. "Yes," he goes on. "I could take you, if I wanted you, could take you right here in the road, in the dirt, in the snow, like a common . . . "

I turn, against my wind driven hair, and glare at him, but knowing, with a rising lump in my throat, that he was right. Who would hear my screams? Who would abandon the warmth of their homes and go abroad in the night to search out the wails of lovers? None!

His voice is calmer now, mingling with the clatter of eight frolicking hoofs. I have already seen the fire in his crystal clear eyes, and know it is there now, though my gaze is ahead, as if I see a haven there in the uncertain distance, a refuge.

"But, somehow, Attala, I want your heart . . . more than your body."

To the pure in heart all things are pure.

I told him I would go.

Silently, we leave the main road, where the banks of snow have thickened, and up the narrow drive through a tunnel of moss hung trees blacker than any night. Far ahead lamps glow warmly, and there on the front steps to greet us, dwarfed by the tall luminous columns, is old Wroten, the poison of asps on his tongue, a character straight out of one of Shakespeare's tragedies.

"It'll be sin you'll be eatin' this night, Swain, for bringing such an innocent child into this orgy of hell!"

"Shut your trap, old man," Swain demands, sliding from the saddle with the graceful ease of a circus performer. Then he helps me down, and with such a gentleman-like air I feel like an important lady.

We hurry up through the carpet of snow and onto the wide porch, him taking my arm, which sends a chill through me, so that I will not slip and fall on the gathering ice. The tall windows, ablaze, send out their warm welcome by casting their broad beams of gold upon the porch, faintly illuminating the massive round columns which rise two stories and disappear far up into the gray night, like trunks of trees.

"Welcome to Oakleigh," he sighs invitingly, as we go into the warm hall, then on into the massive living room radiant with a hearthfire, cozy beyond all my wildest dreams.

"I imagined it would be like this," I whisper, in awe as I gaze about me. Like most Southern bred girls, I loved beautiful things, splendid things that shone, that gave off light, like cut glass crystal (like Swain's eyes now that I can see them better), silken drapery, thickly woven carpets, paintings in gilt frames of delicate filigree, the fascination of the old ... the family things handed down since the Civil War and cherished like holy relics, all these wondrous trappings I loved and, mainly I suppose, because I did not have them. The more unattainable things are, the more they are wanted.

We stand with our backs to the wide hearth and warm ourselves. He is but a head taller than me, I notice quickly, and more comely than I had imagined, now in the warm flood of firelight. His eyes sparkled down on mine, like ice crystals, marveling at my avid interest in his home, all the while he marveled ... I imagined ... at me.

"It's the most beautiful thing in all the world, more beautiful than anything I've ever seen," I say, almost dramatically, as my eyes search out object upon object, exploring each.

"There's something else more beautiful than this, I think," he comes back, his voice drowned with passion.

"What could be more beautiful than this?"

"You," he murmurs, the sound filling the world.

I drag my eyes from the room up to his. His dark curling lashes frame his downcast eyes like curling feathers, making his eyes all the more water clear, and he has the dark, rakish look of a pirate, that walk the plank kind, and I am talking out of my senses.

"Oh, yes," I answer, still gazing up at him, and my heart repeats yes ... yes ... a thousand times, and each echoes in turn.

"I'm glad you came too," he assures, his eyes raking recklessly over mine. He smiles a mischievous smile, his dimples showing, his lips red and cleanly outlined, like a woman's. He turns, faces the fire, props one Wellington booted foot on the huge dogirons, and his face, golden now, turns serious, a furrow of wrinkles in his smooth brow. "Never have any company much, since Mother and Father went, not decent company anyway."

"Am I decent company?" I ask, overjoyed.

"Yes," he answers lowly, not looking at me. "More decent than anyone I ever bring here."

"Is that why the old man, what's his name, said this was a orgy, or something, out of hell."

He laughs a bitter laugh.

"Wroten don't think much of the friends I keep company with."

"He thinks you a naughty boy?"

"He's mid-victorian, like Father . . . six days to labor and the seventh for the sabbath, and all that. Mr. Too good shoes. Holier than thou."

"Perhaps you are naughty," I tease, warmed now by the fire, and suddenly a person of importance in this great house.

He glances down at me. His lips curl in a reckless smile.

"I could be naughty with you, Attala."

"Eat in company and sleep alone," I say, repeating to him what I had said to Aunt Pauline earlier, a phrase Mama had worked to death, as she did with other phrases, if they were good ones.

His eyes are quizzical now. Disturbing.

"Is that why you are afraid of me? You think I want . . . that I want to go to bed with you?"

"No," I lie. That was what I was afraid of. This fear had been drilled into me by Mama, since I was old enough to know what the opposite sex was.

"I do want you, Attala," he says, and his powerful voice, so brimming with emotion, seems to fill this massive room. "But, thank God, I am gentleman enough to recognize a lady when I see one."

I beam with pride. No boy, nor man, had ever lavished such praise on me before, and every nerve within me tickles. Oh, boys at school had teased, like Joel, had pulled my hair, had chased me up trees, had ducked me at the creek, had even tusseled with me . . . which Mama said afterwards was most unladylike, but no one, especially not a college student, had ever said such things to me, tantalizing things!

“How do you know I’m a lady?” I ask, baiting him in a bid for more praise.

“I just do,” he answers, his eyes glowing hotly, going up and down my tiny body, undressing me with their steady glow. “You’re clean, shiny, like a new penny. Wholesome as bread (I did not know if I wanted to be wholesome with him or not), the kind of girl most men look for in marriage but never find.” He strikes up a tune. “You are the girl, just like the girl, that dear old Papa wed.” We break out in childish laughter. “That’s the kind of girl you are, Attala.”

“Thanks,” I say casually, but it pours up from the depths of my heart. Everything he says, everything he does, his every gesture, is catching at my innocent girl’s heart like broomstraw that catches at you in the lanes. His personality, though I have known him but shortly, is already stronger than mine. It is dragging me with him, like two magnets turned to opposite ends. He is sweeping me away on the wild tide of his emotions, and suddenly there seems no other world but him and me in this great mansion, that there is only darkness beyond this moment, that I had never had any home but this, that there was no Mama, no Papa, that even Heaven was shut.

Wroten comes in, shattering our mood like thin glass, wringing his hands from the bitter cold outside, his dark shoulders peppered with snow crystals.

“Shall I prepare supper for two, Swain,” he mutters, cutting sharp black eyes at me, then to Swain,” or shall I serve the usual?”

“Supper!” Swain roars, disrespectfully, and the sound seems to shake the room. I see this violence in him, as I had detected it the moment he had dashed up to me on his horse out on that still, cold road, and uneasiness and something of dread sweeps over me like a warning.

“Cold ham perhaps,” Wroten stretches out the violence, not budging an inch. “Or, what about some of the pork roast? It’s still good, and I’m sure the … the lady would enjoy that with Conch Salad and Gumbo File.”

“Oh, my God, man! Anything!” Swain storms, his crystal eyes suddenly like hot glass.” Just so it’s hot!”

Wroten turns and leaves the room.

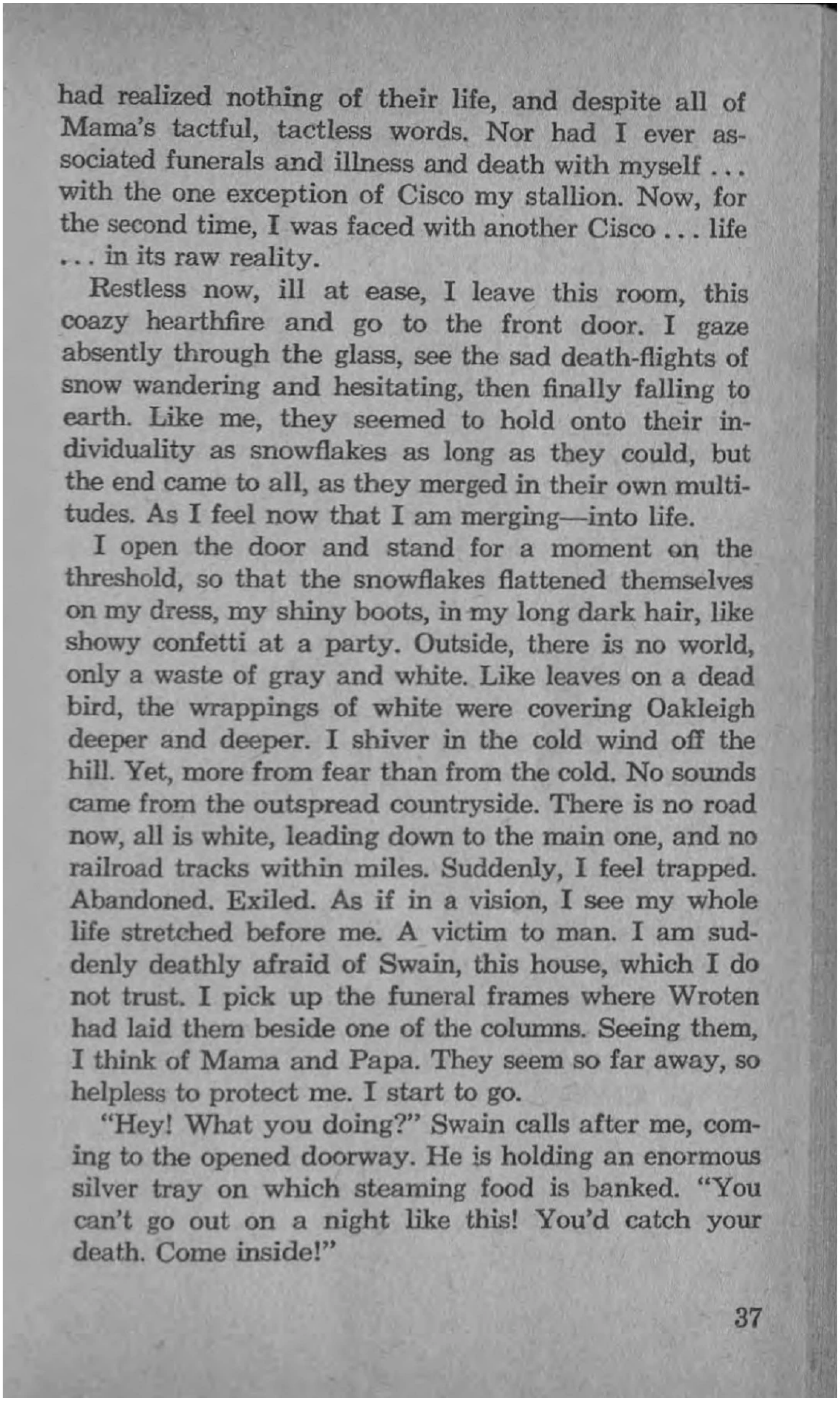
“I’ll go help him,” Swain says, almost apologetically, his eyes dragging over mine. They flinch, and in them I see, even at my early age, something of unleashed passion and cruelty. Perhaps, they flinch at my own innocence, a purity which is a rarity with him, I do not know. There is no way yet to tell. But when he is gone I stand alone in the middle of this grand room, on this blue ash flooring overlaid with a rich wine carpet, with its Chippendale chairs, its walnut secretary, its French fruitwood chest, its coin silver tea service, and a new dawn of reality comes upon my senses for the first time.

Something happens in my brain. Perhaps, it is the realization of life in relation to myself. I did not know it then, but I know it now, that it marked the end of my childhood. I no longer, in this moment, in that cozy room, saw myself throned above life and fate, as a child does. That I was part of it all, mutable and mortal.

I had seen life go on, had heard of funerals, courtings, confinements and weddings, in their conventional order, even partaking in marriage ceremoies, dressing folks for burial, but I had remained, somehow, as it were, intact, and apart from it all.

Girl friends had hinted of a wild revelry that went on somewhere … everywhere … calling, like a hidden merry-go-round, to any who cared to hear. But, till this instant, I had not heard.

In the past, I had felt vaguely sorry for these girls … who had gotten themselves into trouble … but I



had realized nothing of their life, and despite all of Mama's tactful, tactless words. Nor had I ever associated funerals and illness and death with myself . . . with the one exception of Cisco my stallion. Now, for the second time, I was faced with another Cisco . . . life . . . in its raw reality.

Restless now, ill at ease, I leave this room, this coazy hearthfire and go to the front door. I gaze absently through the glass, see the sad death-flights of snow wandering and hesitating, then finally falling to earth. Like me, they seemed to hold onto their individuality as snowflakes as long as they could, but the end came to all, as they merged in their own multitudes. As I feel now that I am merging—into life.

I open the door and stand for a moment on the threshold, so that the snowflakes flattened themselves on my dress, my shiny boots, in my long dark hair, like showy confetti at a party. Outside, there is no world, only a waste of gray and white. Like leaves on a dead bird, the wrappings of white were covering Oakleigh deeper and deeper. I shiver in the cold wind off the hill. Yet, more from fear than from the cold. No sounds came from the outspread countryside. There is no road now, all is white, leading down to the main one, and no railroad tracks within miles. Suddenly, I feel trapped. Abandoned. Exiled. As if in a vision, I see my whole life stretched before me. A victim to man. I am suddenly deathly afraid of Swain, this house, which I do not trust. I pick up the funeral frames where Wroten had laid them beside one of the columns. Seeing them, I think of Mama and Papa. They seem so far away, so helpless to protect me. I start to go.

"Hey! What you doing?" Swain calls after me, coming to the opened doorway. He is holding an enormous silver tray on which steaming food is banked. "You can't go out on a night like this! You'd catch your death. Come inside!"

There is authority in his loud voice, and I stand on the steps shivering, looking up at him.

"I've got to go," I explain, my teeth rattling. "I've just got to go!"

"Why?"

"I'm afraid," I stammer.

"Afraid of the old man? Of me?"

"Of this house," I lie, and, even as I say this, even as I think it, I realize how untimely are my words. For how could anyone fear this lovely home, with its coziness, like a bird's nest, with its richly laid trappings, its glowing mahogany furnishings, its flickering hearthfires, all, like a loving, grateful heart.

"You must be mad, girl!" he storms, his dark brow twisted, his glittering black hair sprinkled with flakes, so daringly unafraid there above me, protective, even in my fear of him, a knight in armor, my girlhood's cavalier on the white horse of dreams, yet, all screaming through my every vein, mingling enthrallingly with Mama's voice calling me to safety. "Afraid of this house!" he goes on in the bleak stillness, in the everlasting darkness. "Nothing to harm you here. Thought you loved it? I have an idea. Would you like to put on an ante-bellum dress? There's one upstairs. You can be my Southern belle!"

Yes, I'd like that. I did not have to consider. I had never had on an evening dress, not even a short ball dress, except once, and that was in a school operetta named "The Blue Belt." I, as all modern Southern girl's, loved pre-civil war clothes, those voluminous hooped skirts, those lace hats, those frills and laces and pastel organdy's and mesh crinolines and rustling taffetas.

Like a moth drawn to amber, I follow him back into the hall, on into the living room, drugged, as an elf on too much meligin. Papa had once said, as Hitler's Mein Kampf, that you can take your enemy provided you take only a little at a time. Swain is taking me, a little at a time, like a mouse nibbling on a piece of cheese. Drawn, both in youth and my countrified ignorance, I can no more help myself than those blameless women of the past sacrificed on drucidicial altars.

He sits the tray on the coffee table, goes upstairs, and returns with the dress. It is canary yellow taffeta, my favorite color, and flounced with yards of billowing overlaid pleats and petti-coats.

With a wicked grin he tosses it into my lap.

"Belonged to my great Grandmother, once the belle of Holly Springs and Memphis. Hope you can wear it half as well!"

He notices my excitement and, under his beaded gaze, I slip off my faded school dress and into the rustling gown fit for any queen. It is slashed in front, all but baring my bosom and, as I turn lightly in a graceful whirl, sending the enormous skirt out like a parasol, he claps his hands in approval.

"Straight out of the pages of Gone With The Wind," he says, his dark face beaming with pride. "What a woman!"

"I'm only thirteen," I remind him, preening the glittering material, the tiny rosetes at the hollow of my breasts.

"But, like you said on the road . . . you're a woman grown," he praises, which I drank, like hot wine, with his every word. Words of praise that lead on, like Aunt Pauline's prophecy, to the essence of my fated destiny.

Rising suddenly from his chair, he sweeps me into his arms. He makes light tease, aping some favorite movie star, I imagine.

"Give me a kiss, you wench!"

An instant of panic seizes me. I shove him off.

"Swain! Look but don't touch."

I give him my best smile.

"Playing hard to get . . . eh?"

"I'm not playing at all. Remember, you promised."

He looks defeated, like a child whose brightest toy has been taken from him.

"Oh well," he shrugs. "Can't go back on my promises can I? Or else you won't ever see me again . . . will you, Attala?"

I shake my head, though it is spinning at his wanting to see me again. I am deeply flattered, when there were so many girls more his age in college, beautiful girls he could date. I was certain he could have any girl in Mississippi, if he so minded.

He leans on the white marble mantle for a moment, sadly, stares into the fire. His handsome profile, emblazoned against the flames, is like the carved head of a pagan on a new golden coin. He is so wantonly desirable. Yet, so fearsome.

"Can I see you again, Attala?" he questions, still gazing into the flames.

"Maybe," I answer, seating myself in one of the queen Anne chairs which faces the hearth, my skirt billowing about me like a silken mushroom. I lead him on, like Clotho spinning the thread of life, yet follow him, like Sibyl follows Aeneaus into Hades. Not that I am especially talented in the art of guile and coquetry. All that will come later in my life. But at my age, naturalness is guile enough for most men, especially men the age of Swain. "Mama doesn't allow me to date men of whom she knows nothing."

"I can furnish a blue ribboned pedigree," he suggests, smiling. "Tamblyn is an old aristocratic southern name. Grandfather and Grandmother Tamblyn came here from Macon, Georgia. Their parents in turn came from England, or Scotland actually, and of good family. To be truthful Mother wasn't much, a rambler, but Father kept her in check. Him and Grandmother. It was they who instilled in me, I reckon, my love for this place." He turns and gazes round the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "They knew all there is to know about breeding and elegance and aristocracy. Mother was the black sheep, if we had one. She didn't care a fathom about keeping the old south intact, and cared less about the Confederate cause and this house. She would have had this place torn down and replaced with a ranch style split-level if it wasn't for Father and Grandmother. Modern was her word, and she was that to extreme. Drank like a fish. Swore like a sailor. And dressed like Lady Astor. Mother was pretty though, looked like a queen ... that is, until she opened her mouth. Why Father ever married her is beyond my reasoning . . ."

"You don't have to explain all that," I say calmly, enjoying his lamentations, but feeling I had invaded his privacy.

"Mother," he continues, as though I had not spoken, "explained that the reason Father married her was that he just couldn't do without her ass, which . . ."

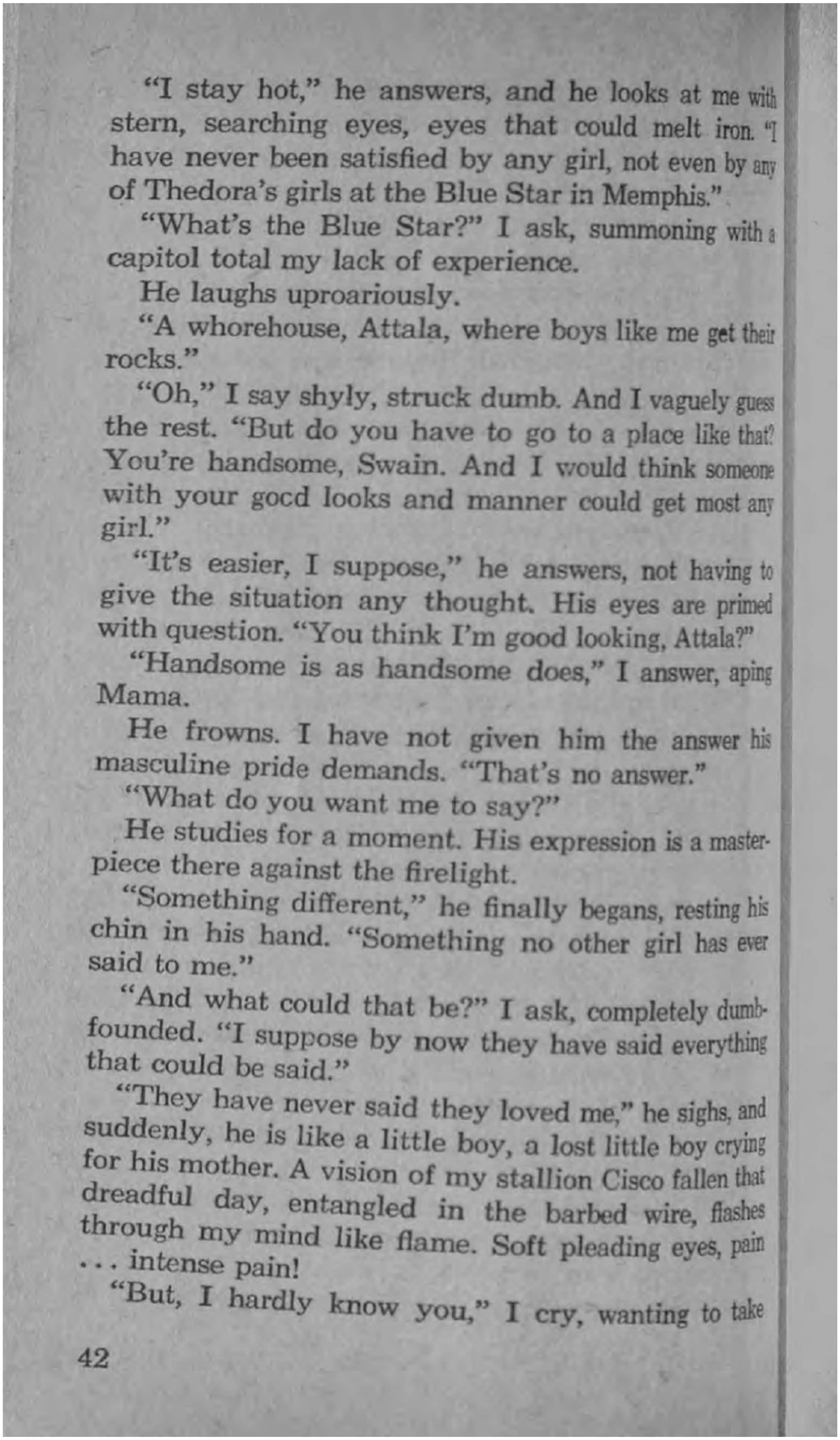
I blush.

"What a horrid thing to say!" I blurt out untimely.

"I don't blame Father," he sighs, waving a hand. "Mother was a good looking woman, with a figure like Clara Bow. Bet that old girl was a siren in the bedroom." He laughs softly. I see he is enjoying me as a listener. "One time I watched them, hid under the bed. Best burlesque show I've ever seen. Guess I take after Father, despite his outward mid-victorian attitudes. He was as horny as I am."

He is silent for a moment.

"You crave girls so much?" I ask, then realize I have made a stupid blunder. I squirm. Living with Mama and Papa all these years, without outside influences, I had become too factual, too honestly frank. "I mean, do you care for girls so much?" I crane my neck, flutter my eyelids, in an effort to bland over my faults.



"I stay hot," he answers, and he looks at me with stern, searching eyes, eyes that could melt iron. "I have never been satisfied by any girl, not even by any of Thedora's girls at the Blue Star in Memphis."

"What's the Blue Star?" I ask, summoning with a capitol total my lack of experience.

He laughs uproariously.

"A whorehouse, Attala, where boys like me get their rocks."

"Oh," I say shyly, struck dumb. And I vaguely guess the rest. "But do you have to go to a place like that? You're handsome, Swain. And I would think someone with your good looks and manner could get most any girl."

"It's easier, I suppose," he answers, not having to give the situation any thought. His eyes are primed with question. "You think I'm good looking, Attala?"

"Handsome is as handsome does," I answer, aping Mama.

He frowns. I have not given him the answer his masculine pride demands. "That's no answer."

"What do you want me to say?"

He studies for a moment. His expression is a masterpiece there against the firelight.

"Something different," he finally begans, resting his chin in his hand. "Something no other girl has ever said to me."

"And what could that be?" I ask, completely dumbfounded. "I suppose by now they have said everything that could be said."

"They have never said they loved me," he sighs, and suddenly, he is like a little boy, a lost little boy crying for his mother. A vision of my stallion Cisco fallen that dreadful day, entangled in the barbed wire, flashes through my mind like flame. Soft pleading eyes, pain . . . intense pain!

"But, I hardly know you," I cry, wanting to take that hurt look out of his woebegone eyes, but not knowing exactly how. Boys had always been nothing but what they were . . . boys, and here I was face to face with a man, and not only a man, but a passionate, savage man battling his loneliness . . . wanting love, with the identical desperation that all mankind wants love, from the cave to the temple.

"Could you ever love me, Attala?" he cries, with the cry of the damned. "Could you ever love me the way I want to be loved . . . the way I must be loved?"

I stand then, as if pulled up by an unseen hand, fighting this longing within me, this something that is whirling me out of my childhood, turning me into a woman.

"I don't know," I answer him, but more with my seraching eyes than with my words. "I—I have never thought of loving someone, giving love, not till now. It's only been Mama and Papa."

"Well, think about it, please," he demands. Then, so quickly that my head swims, he folds me into his arms. My body is bent back, the hard buttons on his shirt pressing into my breasts, his steel-like arms moulding me to him, and he kisses me full upon the mouth, softly, warmly at first, then passionately.

I try vainly to fight him off, but now a sickening nausea sweeps through me, and I all but go limp in his arms.

"I want you, Attala," he whispers hoarsely, his hot lips on my neck, the hollow between my breasts. "And I gotta have what I want. I mean that, Attala, I've gotta have you . . . now!"

"No! Please," I cry out between his kisses. "Swain, please!"

Wild now, his fingers claw at my dress, slip the yellow strands of silk down over my arms, my shoulders.

"Attala! Attala," he murmurs, his voice muffled, frightening. "Let me . . . please let me!"

"Stop!" I shout, as terror runs through me like a storm, as his mouth slips over mine, as his stout hands draw me to him, so tightly I can feel the pressure of his rounded chest against me, his hard thighs against mine, the steel of his arms like a vice which I cannot break.

But surprisingly, at that one word, he lets me go, and stands glaring over me while my breasts heave, while I try and catch my breath.

"You little prick teasing bitch!" he roars, hatefully.

Young, proud, spilling over with vanity, hard . . . as all youth is hard, I rebel at his words, his slurring voice. Like lightening, my temper unleashed, I draw back my hand and slap him full across the face. The sound rings in the still room.

Like the day Cisco died, the limbs of the trees outside, rakes down the side of the house like something trying to get in, adding still more terror to my disheveled nerves.

He glares then, once he has recoiled from the slap, as if he is going to kill me with his bare hands. I shrink back against the chair, my hands before my breasts. I want to cry, but I dared not in front of him, to give him the least inkling of my fear of him.

Wroten comes into the room.

"Is there something wrong, Swain?"

"Hell no!" he answers sharply. "Get out!"

It was obvious they had never gotten on well together. The one approving, the other disproving.

Wroten hurries out of the room. Use to Swain's wrath, he knew to stay clear of it.

He moves toward me, menacingly. I have never been so frightened in my life.

"Don't touch me!" I half-scream, remembering all too swiftly now all the precautions Mama had taught me. "Mercy! Swain, have mercy!"

"Baby, I just want to touch you," he murmurs, reaching out a hand. It is trembling, that fine steady hand, youthful, athletic, the smooth flesh firmed tightly over the bones . . . trembling!

He touches my bare neck. His hand, soft now like velvet, slips to the back of my head, beneath my disheveled hair, a hand now as soft, as soothing as a surgeon's.

"Attala," he whisperes, and so maddeningly. "Forgive me. Please! I didn't mean to frighten you . . . honest."

Being all female, I forgive.

"Let's sit, and eat, and talk," he suggests, and kisses me warmly on the brow. "Eat before the food gets cold. I'll never frighten you again—ever!"

So we sit, facing each other across the coffee table, and self-consciously pick at the food. His eyes shift, when he thinks I am looking at him, which makes us both uncomfortable.

"What are you going to do when you finish at Mississippi State?" I ask, trying to make conversation. I am still nervous, ever cautious of him, and drop my fork. It hits the plate with a clang. It bounces off on the floor, and as I lean to pick it up, he answers:

"Oh, a whoremonger, I guess."

I sit up quickly at that one dispicable word. Our eyes meet and hold but for one momentary instant.

"I mean . . . really what do you intend to do?"

"Join the service like Father did during World War I, and Grandfather . . . the Marines . . . like they did. Go to war."

I give him a startled look.

"What war?"

He scoffs. "My, but you are buried aren't you, child?"

I didn't feel I was that dumb.

"Rumors," I shrug. "But only rumors. Papa is always reading things in the paper to Mama and me, things about Japan's Mein Kampf, their plans to rule the world. But that has yet to be proved. A fraud, Papa says. And things about Mussolini and Ethiopia, and the Suez Canal, and Hitler and the return of the Reich, things Mama and I can't understand."

"Well, you shouldn't understand," he says sympathically, then pauses to sip his coffee. "You're women, and women are not supposed to know about such things."

"Why not?" I protest. "Women are as smart as men."

"Name one?"

"Amelia Earheart . . . for one."

"Just because she can fly a plane doesn't make her smart."

I shrug. "Perhaps not. Besides, there isn't going to be a war."

He sits his cup on the table and looks at me, a long interesting look. "Isn't going to be a war . . . eh? What do you think Hitler is rearming the Reich for? One million men in uniform, my prof at State says. Hitler has already taken The Rhineland, scrapping the Locarno treaty. The Spanish are now fighting the Fascists. The Fascists have already bombed Manchuria, and Ethiopia, and Madrid, killing hundreds of helpless women and children. Nazi pilots have killed over a thousand civilians in Barcelona. We already have around two thousand men in Spain, a part of the International Brigade to help wipe out Nazi and Fascist forces. Its frightening."

I agree, nodding my head. I preen my hair with nervous fingers. His talk of war is doing little to make the night any better.

"Am I boring you?" he asks, eying me seriously.

"No," I answer, and my voice seems but a whisper. "I just don't like the thought. Papa used to talk about

World War I . . . makes goose bumps pop out all over me. Hope you never have to go."

He rises and stands for a moment in front of the hearth, his hands thrust in his tan riding pants pockets. The firelight plays along his legs, where the material draws tightly, and he looks so powerful, so utterly masculine.

"If war comes, I'll go. The men in my family have always done their part in the service."

He kicks the back-log. A billion sparks, like Christmas fireworks, shoot out and up the chimney. The fierce light plays wildly the length of him. It draws out the dangerous sparkle in his crystal eyes. And makes his whole person seem dangerous, like a wild animal.

He asks. "Ready to go to bed?"

I let out a terrible, defenseless sigh. My entire body trembles. I nod, as I rise, my taffeta petti-coats rustling like wind driven leaves. Tremble, like the tremor in my heart.

He takes one of the kerosene lamps, and I follow him slowly up the stairs, and through the first door at the right of the upper landing. He sets the lamp on a marble topped table in the center of the room, and draws the heavy brocaded drapes.

"Its the guest room," he says, pivoting, his hand out. like a guide. "It's rarely if ever used. Hope you're comfortable. The bathroom is through that door there."

"I know I will be comfortable," I answer, my voice still shaky. I eye the huge Sheraton bed with its beautiful Whig rose coverlet. As soft as Heaven.

"Good night," he murmurs, then leaves the room.

Slipping out of my dress, I blow out the lamp and, and it throws a ghostly pallor over the hillsides, the night. The moon is up now, high in the cold gray sky, and it throws a ghostly pallow over the hillsides, the desolate fields, like a blue spotlight on a stage. It streams through the frosty panes, into the room, and casts its hue on the carpet, the bed, the flower-printed walls, over my naked arms, my tumbled hair.

I think of Mama. She seems a thousand miles away at this moment.

"Oh, God!" I whisper a selfless prayer. "Let me keep my good name!"

I put back the covers and sink into the mountain of stuffed feathers. Fighting sleep as long as possible, I doze, then wake again when some protective instinct tells me someone is in the room.

It is Swain. He is standing near the window looking in my direction, and an instant of stark terror runs through me like an electrical current. He is completely undressed, and the soft moonlight, like a light that will pick out a certain jewel on a woman's gown, pin-points his dark form in high-relief. My inexperienced eyes upon such things, in an instant, goes over his naked body. His shoulders are so broad, like a statue hewn from stone, yet so glowingly soft there in the waning light, and the black hair on his chest and abdomen stands out harshly, savagely, against the pallor of his flesh. My eyes sweep over his maleness, and I think of my stallion, as I see his organs there in the nest of black hair, in the secretive hollow of his loins.

Slowly now he advances toward me and, before I can let out a cry, (I am too numbed to cry) he slips beneath the covers and over my own body, his warm mouth over mine, his hard, dark body pressing into me, moving in between my legs, being chafed by the wiry hair, the hard muscle. I suddenly feel faint, overpowered by something over which I have no restraint, surrendering to something which is sweeping me away, something strong, powerful, overwhelming. I feel his hands go over me, like a million hands moving at once, feel my clothes being slipped from my body, helpless now as a babe.

He says nothing to me, nor I to him, strangely, and goes about his wanton desires as if I had been his all his life, to do with as he pleases. In this world to which I was a part, his world, his dark being was carved above me, like a mountain against the sky, slenderly minute: yet instinct with flaming forces, enough to uproot a thousand trees and become, by virtue of these, the center of my picture.

He is as sure of me as he is of his inheritance, his family name, driving me counter-instinct to what I am, what I believe.

There is a power on me now, driving me against the one instinct my youth held so precious, the instinct for flight, for preservation. Yet, this power is as nothing compared to his, the force of his soft, warm lips on mine, the fondling hands, his hard chest, his coarse thighs. He enters me, as I have seen the stallions enter the fillies in Papa's barn, that savage splendor mixed with pain, and to me now he is both a terror and a fascination. Suddenly, it seems that the whole world, the hills, the woods, this house, were all Swain. He is my night, my sky, my world, my cloak.

His whole body moves now, like a wayward force, in that slow, rhythmic alternation, like a piston in warm oil, the easy grace I will come to know later . . . I do not know this now . . . of his satisfaction of enjoying my body, his hungry lips given more than he takes, his hands, his arms, gathering me up to him protectively, as if trying to hide me from the world, as an animal will try and hide food.

And all this while I am being taken out of myself, feeling emotions I have never felt before, being thrilled in the thrilling, glorying in the ecstasy of Swain, this hard athletic student who hungers for me . . . a hungriness I must fulfill.

Finally we sleep, curled up like two kittens, my long hair coiled round his naked arm beneath my neck, and we awake in the dovegray hour that precedes dawn, winter dawn, of snow crystals on the panes, of blinding white blankets lain over the hills and valleys, and when so many tiny birds have frozen, and squirrels have died in the darkness trying to reach their burrows . . . while Swain and I have lived . . . a dawn pregnant with the future, but without hope.

It brings truth, and we lie in each others arms weeping like children. All that we had done was wrong. All that we did was inevitable.

"How do you feel?" he asks of me, the first words he has spoken all night. His hardness and strength had taken on a pitiful dolt-like air before this prescient power of his passions, and he was all softness and tenderness.

"Ruined . . . bruised . . . robbed!" I whimper into the coverlet.

"Ah, sweetheart," he murmurs, drawing me still closer to him. "Don't feel like that. Whatever we do together, its right for us. The way things should be. And don't ever feel shamed. God understands."

Did he? Mama would have thought otherwise. Like in those dark days of the golden calf, he would have struck Swain and me blind, or emaciated our bodies with leprosy. If you do wrong, you will feel the wrath of God, she would sermon, adding: Life is kind to those who banish evil.

I think of her now, as if she is an angel standing over my every action . . . to bless or curse.

"What will Mama think?" I cry, hopeful of some reassurance from him, who is more to blame.

"Good God! Attala." he cries, propping himself up on his elbows. His crystal eyes, bearing down into mine, is like the eyes of Jesus looking at Magdalen. "You're not thinking of telling her?"

"I tell her everything."

"Well, suppose you leave this one off."

I vowed I wouldn't tell.

We got up and dressed and went down stairs. Wroten was already in the kitchen preparing breakfast and, while Swain went back to hurry him up, I lingered about the lower rooms, drinking in the beauty of the place under the glory of day. The sun, just peeping up, lay long volleys of light across the snow banks, which reflected the light in return, and everything was lit up as bright as mid-day.

Finally, I sit down in the house that is not home, and gauged my potentials for becoming its mistress. I think how wonderful it would be to be married to Swain. And I say to myself very slowly: Mrs. Swain Tamblyn . . . Mrs. Swain Tamblyn. How nice to be called that! Then and there I swore to get him.

A great aspiration for a girl of thirteen. But I am determined. I feel now, and with a wild fascination, that I can never do without him. We belong, as no two people can belong, and I fail to gauge the consequences should my desperation fail. My mind travels the happenings of the night, and I cannot see the future without him. Yesterday, I thought I needed no one, born free, intact, unattached, except to life, nature, my mother's love. Now, in the morning light, I see and understand how necessary Swain is to me, his physical presence, this great house, a part of his world.

I long now to be a part of his world, and without that I shudder at the vacancy of my own life, see the dullness, the drabness of my simple existence if he is not a part of it . . . a great part . . . in fact, every part.

I rise, and, as I stand alone in the middle of this enormous room, flanked by all this grandeur, I realize suddenly that my ambition is fixed. My life's ambition. I want to belong to Swain.

After a talkative breakfast, he tells me everything about the house, his family, school, and being fussed over by Wroten . . . whose piercing eyes I cannot bring myself to face, Swain and I go out into the yard and feed bread crumbs to cardinals and thrushes and white throated sparrows who, in their hunger, flock together in mutual compromise.

The huge trees with their shrouds of ice laden moss, hang above us, blotting out the warm sun, and the clear sparkling light far out over the fields, the bare hills. Bordering the fences are bramble wreaths of possum haw holly, darkly green, and the red berries are like millions of tiny eyes, glaring accusingly. Here and there trim cedars dot the picture of white, and magnolias are everywhere, their enameled leaves lke candy in the lacquer of ice. Peeping up from the foldings of snow are yellow rhododendrons, shiny as apples dipped in syrup, and fall asters rear their flaming heads in a farewell to Indian summer.

The horse is brought around by Wroten and, as I climb into the saddle, Swain takes hold of my booted ankle.

"Where do you live, Attala? I want to come see you?"

I shake my head, my long hair tossing.

"Not yet," I whisper, but wanting to tell him, desperately. "Not yet. Mama wouldn't understand. I'd have to do too much explaining."

His crystal eyes are naked on mine.

"I've got to see you. Wherever you go in the world, I'll not be far behind.

"Leave the poor child be," says Wroten, his evil eye, battling evil, giving us the once over. "You've ruined the girl already, or, haven't you had your trouble for nothing?"

"Shut up, you old fool!" Swain shouts, still looking up at me. "Please, sweetheart, I'm going to find you, if I have to go to every house in Attala county."

"Like a stallion, breaking every fence in the country over some filly mare," Wroten adds, braving inevitable odds to get through his sermon. Then concludes: "I suppose late love's worse than lad's love, so they do say."

"There's nothing of love between us," Swain remarks, swinging round to face him.

I am shocked to hear him say this, after all his loving me last night. My heart, inexperienced in the callousness of man, refuses to take it in.

"I don't wonder at it," Wroten says, casting an eye at Swain then up to me, where his gaze lingers. "You've hurt her now . . . never get another bite of that apple!"

I go off in a thunder, tears streaming down my eyes, my sore heart bursting at what Swain had said, him chasing after me, the armful of funeral frames jogging painfully.

Once at the main road I turn Dusty and look back at the house. Swain and Wroten are nowhere to be seen. The house itself, fronting the sky, the white hills, has a look of power and patience. And I feel that it is not yet done with me. I think of Swain, if he would suddenly appear at one of the many windows, and a tiny traitorous wish slips up from somewhere in my heart. I watch the windows until a turn in the road hides the house, then I put Dusty to a gallop.

Mama is waiting for me.

"So you got the frames," she says, delighted, as she stands in the kitchen door, holding it back for me to enter. "How is sister Pauline?"

"Fine as frog's hair," I answer, looking at her sheepishly. But I think of that over-stuffed Cassandra doling out her prophecies, and me fulfilling them. My face flushes, like a fever.

Mama draws me before the fire, helps me out of my coat and boots, and beguiles me with a cup of steaming cocoa. When I have finished it, she pulls me into her arms, lays my head on her bosom, her loving hands going through my hair.

"You're such a good girl, Tala," she sighs, causing me to blush suddenly and think of Swain. "Such a sweet girl."

Chapter Two

That following spring I met Thad Sterling. It was at an all day dinner on the ground at Doty Springs Church. He was from Sallis, and had come up to visit my best girl friend at school, Dolly McCool, for the summer holidays.

I had passed the bleakness of winter reading and watching for Swain, any signs that would tell me that he was out searching for me. Once, I thought I had seen him skirting our corn field, but I wasn't sure. And I had seen him only once since that wild night in which I had gloried. It was in Ethel. I was in the drugstore buying Christmas cards when I noticed him drive by in a brand new wine colored Terraplane sedan. Of course, he hadn't seen me, and it was just as well, since Mama was with me at the time.

I brooded. Mama kept me drugged on cough syrup, and a concotion she brewed for what she called the Dropsy. Actually, it was my heart, for which there was no medicine, heartbreak that Swain had wanted me for no other reason than a night's pleasure. At first this had not soaked in. I was yet too young to believe that he cared nothing for me, yet thwarted rape soon burned within me that he did not care, had never cared, and would never care, and that rage smouldered, then burned itself out as days lingered into weeks and weeks into months without him.

Despertately, I yearned to ride over to Oakleigh, if for no other reason than just to see him, to be near him, to hear his voice, but I did not dare, simply for the reason that I could find no excuse to tell Mama. And as the weeks wore on without him I hated myself for not telling him where I lived. My protective instincts had made me foolish. I had not thought of that then, especially when I stood in that great room and swore that I would have him for my own.

My own for one night.

And this horrid realization had brought me many tears and many sleepless nights. I lost weight. I all but pinned away, despite all Mama's efforts to perk me up, to instill within me an interest in life.

I finished Shepherd of the Hills, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, and read into The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come when the first chill of April, 1937 warmed into a balmy spring.

Though I was no better off emotionally, spring did help a great deal in reviving my attitude . . . which had always been a healthy one . . . and I began to look forward to the church gatherings, people, activity.

Dinner on the ground at Doty Springs church was my mother's favorite outing, for it brought relatives together, and friends we had not seen for a year. A long talked about event in the planning. A long discussed after glow once it was over.

Mama made us both new dresses from the egg money she had saved, and she fussed over them days in advance, ripping out seams, restitching, remeasuring, taking on and taking off, until Papa cussed and she wept, and I was miserable mooning about Swain.

My dress was yellow, all over embroidery, with tiny flowerlets beneath which my white silk slip showed through. The bright yellow makes my dark complexion glow and, as I stand before my mirror in my prim little room, with its new pine walls radiant, with its ceiling beams showing just above my head, I turn from side to side, admiring myself in the reflection. I have drawn my long dark hair back over my head smoothly, and have caught it with a yellow comb at the nape of my neck, and have fashioned huge Spanish curls in front of my ears. I pin a nosegay of purple spring violets between my breasts, like a broach, and slip into my yellow quarter length gloves. I am wearing yellow high heel pumps, brought in Kosciusko with money I had made selling hand painted china for Christmas gifts, and my curved legs are bare, as becoming a girl of fourteen.

Mama calls, and we three go out, through the front yard foamed over with flaming Azaleas, Phlox, Jerusalem Thorn, Roses of every size and color, past the smelly cape jasmine bushes Mama tends so religiously and to Papa's old 1931 black Durant.

The birds are out, white breasted nuthatch, hairy woodpeckers, thrush in swarming multitudes, jet black martains, Kentucky warblers, and their merry chattering, their busy flights give to this bright spring Sunday morning a reign of festivity. A Cooper hawk sits in a dead black walnut high up, eying us as we slip down the lane, all emerald, and a mocking bird takes up a rivalry in a near by cedar, fluting with skipped notes his long charade of mockery, until the very air is filled with silver.

Through the still countryside we go, Papa ever so silent, Mama jabbering, shortening the distance to our long awaited event. The sky is clean robin egg blue, starred with fleecy white mushroom clouds, and on each side of the dirt road, redder than Georgia, clay, brambles of honeysuckle perfume the morning air with fragrance, and along the rail fences and ditches Trillums hide beneath emerald leaves, and Lady's slipper and Pussy Willow Catkins mingle, dotting the grass beds of purple clover, and entertwining near puddles of bright water where Pickerel weed stand like wax candles.

There is a faint hope, yet one which tingles me from head to toe, that I may chance to see Swain at the church. Practically everyone in Attala county attends this once a year outing, and I dared not think, could not even imagine, that he would be left out.

As we bound down the road, occasionally passing another car, I break out in, "By the waters of Babylon," and Mama, turning to smile, joins in. And after that we move, full noted, into, "I am bound for the promised land," until the old car seems to burst with sound, and causing Papa to shout: "If you don't let up I'll wreck!"

We are in, "Jesus loves me," by the time we reach the church, and we drop out plaintive notes as Papa pulls into the grounds. Hundreds of cars are already parked, Chrysler Airflows, Plymouths, model A Fords, old Jordans and dilapadated Kissels, and one 1935 Cadillac. There are as many wagons and buggies as well, and numerous riding horses and motorcycles, open bodied trucks, and bikes. Judging from the crowds, it is obvious that many have come on foot.

Doty Springs church itself, was made of bone dry cypress, and crowned a bare hill, a knoll of brick red sand that wouldn't grow a single blade oı grass. Here and there, like lost sentinels, stood several scraggly oaks, sparse of leaves, through which the sun burned blindly. But down the hill on all sides shades in abundance, yielded a cool undertone to the fierce heat above, and many people idled there, sitting on the soft new grass fanning with straw fans, or at the spring at the bottom of the hill, dipping up the cool water with tin cups and by the gallon bucket full.

Families were huddled in groups, numerous in this yearly reunion, and there is a lot of shaking hands, hugs, tears, and soft laughter.

We find Mama's folks, that tribe of many sisters and brothers, their wives and children and their children's children, all whom Mama adores with a passion impossible, it seems, in one person, and we go to them in a shower of greetings.

Introductions! Introductions! First cousins and second cousins and kissing cousins galore! I have to hug and kiss old bewhiskered men, have to shout into deaf ears, have to walk with Uncles hobbling on canes, have to endure the frank criticisms of old matrons, the hot piercing eyes of countrified cousins (and what a pleasure!) and the envy of girl cousins who call me "fast" and are jealous of their boy friends.

My eyes scan the hot dry air, raking over the hundreds of milling faces, for Swain, for his new car, even for old Wroten. But each time I can break away from conversation and do this, I fall back with disappointment. My nerves wear thin. The day is becoming hotter and hotter, and I slap at the air with Mama's fan, the draft pulling my hair out of place, and search about me. I try to keep up a gay appearance, carry on small talk about school, who is going steady with who, who is in the latest scandal, who is marrying who, the latest divorce, children in my Sunday School class, our newest neighbor, death, a movie, a book, some latecome movie star, but all this while my sharp eyes are on the lookout for Swain, my ears pricked up like a fox at any sounds of his voice in the maddening malee.

Finally, my favorite cousin . . . if I had any favorites (it is merely that she is the only one I can tolerate), Claudine Cameron arrives, and with a flounce of skirts we bound off alone and into the cemetery.

Here, a more solemn air dominates. There are no brash laughing, no feminine giggles, and we go from gravesite to gravesite, over the dry red sand, peer in over the little wooden picket fences which surround the grave plots, reading names between conversation about rural affairs, lamenting impressive inscriptions: Gone but not forgotten, Carried away by a flight of Angels, A bit of Heaven lies buried here, God has called her, joined together at last, Born 1918 the Angels called him in 1934, Rest on embalmed and sainted dead, Jesus has touched thee, Asleep in Heaven, and so on, and on. Dry buds in fruit jars of yellowed water, freshly cut daffodils lying against some unmarked grave, the dirt still fresh, a sprig of marsh fern tied with faded organdy tulle, a bowl of Mountain Laurel, Moonseed left over from a winter visit, bare graves unattended, unadorned.

I stoop over to read a huge marble tomb which spreads the length of four graves, two big ones, two small ones, all fresh.

"The Heath family," Claudine explains. "All of them killed by a train. The two little girls were flung out of the car over a hundred feet. One was only a year old."

"How dreadful," I murmur, my eyes scanning the inscription. They went together, hand in hand.

Then, I hear a familiar voice calling, as the sound draws near.

"Come, Thad. I want you to meet the most hard hearted girl in Attala County."

I look up. It is Dolly McCool.

With her is the most handsome boy I have ever seen.

"Attala Rose . . . this is Thad Sterling," she whispers, introducing us. "My first cousin from Sallis. Going to spend the summer with us."

"Pleased to meet you," I stammer, caught unawares. I introduce him to Claudine. He barely notices her. His eyes burn down on mine, pale azure, that Mama will later describe as perwinkle blue. He is a little taller I think than Swain, a little thinner of frame, of bone, but wiry and bronze, as only the activity of country life can make him, though I will learn later that he is guilty of none of that countryfied diversity so dominant in boys in these parts. His hair is straight and blond, the color of hay in the sun, and lies smoothly across his forehead, neatly trimmed, and adds to the softness of his complexion. His lips are widely cut, slicing his face, and when he smiles, as he is smiling down at me now, they twist far to one side, and there is a display of fine white teeth. There is something so cleany cut about him, of soap and water, of wholesomeness, so unlike the rustic, unpolished countenance of other rural boys, that he seems foreign to the nature of this land, beyond some other region I cannot name. And I ask him if he has lived in Sallis all his life.

"Actually I was born in Jackson," he explains, his western style hat twirling in huge brown hands. "But Mother and I came to Sallis when Father died. We stay with her sister, Aunt Sibille."

"You remember me telling you about Aunt Sibille," Dolly cries, whose cute doll-like face bobbles as she talks like a cork on water. "She owns the gin there, takes in about everybody's cotton to be ginned. Everybody knows her. Richer than Crosus!"

"You mean Croesus, my ignorant cousin," That corrects her. We all laugh softly. "And she's not rich. Just comfortable that's all."

Dolly looks abashed. "Well, she's still got plenty of money. She's even going to send you to art school in Paris, isn't she?"

"You're an artist, Thad?" Claudine asks. "You'll have plenty of competition then. Tala here paints."

"Oh, Claudine!" I protest. I give her a malicious eye.

"You an artist, Attala?" says Thad, and with skepticism.

Claudine laughs.

"She paints eggshell china."

This brings hysterics. Which in turn turns numerous heads. We had forgotten we were in the cemetery.

Thad is apologetic. His twisted grin is fixed on me, his eyes following my every move.

"Don't feel bad, Attala. I've painted ashtrays myself. We'll have to swap our works of art. I'll give you one of my handpainted ashtrays if you'll give me a piece of your eggshell china."

I lift an eyebrow, as Claudine and Dolly look on enviously.

"Sounds like a bargain." And I add with all the coquerty I can summon. "We'll talk nothing but art some Sunday over fried chicken."

"You've hit him right in the heart," beams Dolly, toying nervously with the chin ribbon on her leghorn hat. "He's just about cleaned out Mother's chicken yard. As long as you feed him chicken he'll talk about anything, but he wouldn't know a Raphael from a Lorenzo Lotta."

"A Lorenzo Lott-o you meant to say, cousin," Thad laughs. "But I do know their works, for they both paint nudes."

"Well, La-de-da-da!" Dolly chirps, prancing, her hands on both hips. "When do you want me to pose, Thad darling!"

"The way you carry on," Claudine reprimands her. "Like Mae West . . . and at church!"

"And before dead folks too," Thad carries the triology along, and everyone is glaring at Dolly. "You'll have to excuse my cousin. She's been out in the sun too long."

Claudine spreads her sarcasm thickly.

"Its not the sun she's suffering from . . . its male!"

Dolly seems too happy to allow herself to be riled.

"My fellow is coming. Be here any minute, Claudine Cameron! You're not the only girl in Attala who can catch a beau!"

"I hope he's not the one you were mooning over at Michell's birthday party."

"That's the same one, Claudine honey! He's gone Tarzan of the apes over me. Just can't keep him calm when he's around. He'll be swinging through the trees next."

"Fine Tarzan," Claudine concludes icely. "He chews tobacco!"

"Why . . . Claudine Cameron!" Dolly half screams, a tiny fury. "Now you know that isn't so! Why . . ."

Thad takes my arm and draws me to one side, and we leave Dolly and Claudine standing over the graves of the train victims, shaking their fingers at each other, drawing scorn from passing mourners.

"Aunt Willa better not catch Dolly," he says lowly, giving the two girls a spiteful, side-long glance. "She'll snatch her bald headed!"

"And that would be a crime," I say. "For her hair is Dolly's crowning glory."

He looks at me seriously, his pale blue eyes fathomless in their steadfast gaze.

"I'd like to see you if I may, Attala," he whispers low, his richly southern voice plaintive, with loaded passion. "I'd like that very much. I've never seen a girl as pretty as you."

I am immensely flattered. I think of Swain, and a tiny dart of pain chokes my heart. No utter use to think of him now. I return his gaze, and smile my most captivating smile.

"I'd like that too, Thad. But," and I blush, thinking of Swain, "you'll have to see me at my house. Mama . . . she's fussy about boys who want to take me out. She'd feel better if we were both close around."

"I understand," he says, and with the same passionate tone. "Just so we can be together, that's all. We can sit on your front porch, so she can keep an eye on us."

"Do you think Mama will have to keep an eye on us?" I ask, a little mistrustful, now after Swain. Too, I cannot imagine Thad to be the savage Swain is, so awesome, yet so fascinating. There is not in this blond boy the recklessness, the primitive I had found in Swain. They are as different as day and night, as the Devil and Jesus.

"You do trust me, don't you, Attala?"

I smile wryly at this.

"Of course I do, Thad. Why?"

He becomes laughably shy.

"Well, its just that, that since you know I am an artist . . . you might think me a little wicked."

"Are artists supposed to be wicked?"

"That's the general impression people have of them . . . a studio, painting naked women all day, chasing them all night."

I try to change that impression.

"Thad, just because you paint doesn't make you wicked."

His eyes fairly twinkle.

"I'm glad you think that. Everytime I tell people I'm an artist their faces screw up like I've just committed murder. It isn't fruity you know . . . a man being an artist."

"Who said it was!" The expression was alien to me, but I had a vague idea what it meant. "You're a fine person, Thad. Mama says its a gift from God, being an artist or good at music. You should be proud of your talent."

He frowns, his smooth forehead, beneath his canopy of flaxen hair, a map of tiny rivulets. He looks away over the crowd, as if he sees something there among them I cannot see, then back to me.

"I am proud," he answers. "But Attala county isn't the place for the arts, too backwards, too ... too utterly rural. All people here know is to work in the fields, plant and pick cotton. Art to these people is hanging a colorful calendar in the kitchen, or going down to Kress and buying a print of a woods scene already framed, or worse, buying those so called religious pictures of that peculiarly seedy and emasculated type where the artist has lavished all the slumbering instincts of torture that are in so many people."

I instantly think of Mama, and her collection of sacred pictures which she kept hung in the hall, The Crucifixion, Jesus with his lambs, a blow up of his face, in the garden before his arrest. Dear to her, but, as Thad had said, seedy, with their phosphorescent heads, haloes that had nothing at all to do with religion. I knew little about phosphorus, seeing it sometimes in the swamp at night when a group of us kids went on possum hunts. But one night I had gone into the kitchen to get a drink of water and Papa had lain a sheep's head on the table. It had resembled Mama's pictures.

"Have I said something wrong?" Thad questions me, curious of my sudden silence. His expression is that of genuine concern.

I answer: "What you say is true, in part ... about the pictures and art, but folks here can't help the way they have to make a living. (I am up in arms for Mama and Papa, for I am acutely aware of how hard they have worked in the fields to wrest out a meager living). It's honest work ... even if it's a bit crude."

We are both silent now, as if a gap has spread between us. And in my young mind the sharp memory of hard times cuts the pleasure out of my day, this moment with this good-looking boy, and I think of Attala county, of Mississippi, and the whole country for that matter, trying to rise from the starvation bed of depression which had swept the United States like a plague. I think too of the N.R.A, and the W.P.A, and many of Attala's young men having to go off and join the C.C.C.'s so that their families could make ends meet. I think too of Papa, running his little grist mill behind the barn, grinding the neighbors' corn so that we could have meal for the winter, of his sugar-cane mill so that we could have molasses with our biscuits and salt pork, his repairing harness in the wee hours of the night for a few pennies, or in exchange for food, and Mama, canning and stewing boiling hot fat into lard and drying apples and bedding sweet potatoes in pinestraw, of making quilts from old scraps, and stuffing hog entrails with ground meat for smoked sausage, and making apple butter and maple syrup and split oak baskets for sell, and apple sugar candy so we would have sweets for Christmas, and dolls for me out of corn shucks, and how they both, in even leaner times, would set trot lines and traps and kill squirrel and wild turkey, and buy goat from passing negroes who would sell one for as little as fifty cents a piece. I think too of them sitting by lamplight, long after bedtime, husking black walnuts, shelling pecans, stringing hot pepper, peeling pears and peaches and apples, shelling corn, and whittling wooden toys for needy children.

I see the sacrifices they have made so that I may remain fed and warm and comfortable, and I have the sudden impulse to fling all these noble endurances into this boy's face, but I say instead, as our silence demands voice from one of us.

"If we don't have time to appreciate the arts it's not our fault." His eyes blink, and his lower lip protrudes.

"My words have been untimely, haven't they" he murmurs, his voice suddenly different, estranged. "Perhaps all this is art ... in a form ... the cotton fields, negroes in their wagons going to the fields, this old unpainted church, these graves, with their sad markings, the red sand from which nothing grows, the sawmills smelling of pine, these coarse, hard people old before their time . . . and I'm too close to it all to truly see it."

"Or, appreciate it," I add, and we find a smile for each other.

Dolly and Claudine have had their skirmish of words and come bouncing back to Thad and me, their long hair flying from beneath flowers of wax and ribbon. They are all agog with a new interest.

"They're bringing out the lunches," Claudine squeals, forgetting that she's at church. And I'm completely famished!"

"You can always tell a lady by the way she eats," Dolly is being sarcastic, and her huge brown cow's eyes roll to the top of her brows. "Claudine gobbles like a pig!"

Claudine employes royal tact.

"At least I don't nibble like a humming bird . . . which is a sure sign of an old maid!"

Dolly glares.

"I don't see no one asking you to marry them."

"It's because you're blind, Honey!" Claudine coos and, laying a naked arm on the dark sleeve of Travis Breen, a classmate from Ethel, who sidles by, she disappears with him, laughing, through the closely gathered crowd.

"Oh! that fast hussy!" Dolly shrieks, her hands in hard knots at her sides. "Oh! If only she wasn't your cousin, Attala Rose, what I wouldn't tell her!"

Thad gives her a quizzical look.

"Haven't you done that already, Dolly."

"Just because all the boys say she has pretty hair and eyes don't give her an excuse to put on airs!"

I thought it did. Though I liked Dolly, she could be described by no other word than plain. And Claudine, with her saucy ways, so filled with life and vitality, her cornflower blue eyes and long cornsilk hair, her husky voice, was a beauty, and kept the boys as popeyed as frogs.

But I understand, too, Dolly's drabness, her desperation to be attractive to boys. She has to work in the fields, harder than most boys, hoe, weed, pick cotton, and does most of the cooking and housework for her ailing mother. Her hands stay raw and calloused, red from dish and lye water, her complexion freckled as a guinea hen, has little spare time to fix her hair or dress attractively, and these are not things to help a girl catch a boy.

As now, the boxes and crates being brought from cars and wagons to the picnic site, she hurriedly assists her mother in laying out the food on a plain table cloth spread upon the grass beneath the shade. I help her, since they want me to eat with them, and we giggle and make light talk, with Thad carrying the heavier stuff, until the cloth is littered with homebaked food: platters of fried chicken, potato salad ringed with slices of boiled egg, biscuits, homemade light bread, sliced ham black with pepper, sausage strung, lemon and chocolate pie thick with beaten egg yoke, sliced cucumber in marinade, jelly, sweet potatoe pie, a boiler of dumplings, a molasses cake, and tea cookies sprinkled with sugar.

As is the custom, when the preacher says grace, we three, like everyone else, manuever from one picnic table to the next, tarrying at each for a moment to pick over the food spread in array, selecting our choice, then on to the next. This is especially a practiced habit with the young, for it gives them an excuse to mingle with others their age and to spend a little time with each. There have been many introductions across picnic tables, which have led to romances and marriage and children. And kin folks have accidently run into each other, having not seen each other in years, and the talk of weather, and crops and politics and war have been thrashed out over a piece of chicken, a slice of pie, or thick slices of ham between the soft crust of homemade bread.

Thad is the perfect escort, his broad smile (he seems to be amused by everything ... in a sad way) his twinkling blue eyes, bluer than the white hot sky, and I make a special effort to be seen with him by as many people as possible, especially my classmates and older girls at school who have critized me for "getting grown too quick." Most girls didn't like me, primarily for this reason, my early maturity, and with the exception of Dolly and my cousin Claudine I had very little in common with any of the girls at school. With boys, it is quite different. I could talk to boys, felt at ease with them, for I possessed intelligence beyond my years, a frankness, an honesty girls did not admire nor understand in other girls, but which boys found attractive, mainly, because I was their equal, made no qualms at being inferior or dumb or helpless like most girls, that fainting kind, and boys in turn were at ease with me, romping and teasing or just sitting and talking horse sense.

To me, and my kind, girls were a natural enemy, and every boy a possible lover.

We locate Mama's and Papa's picnic spread, brought in the back of Papa's car in an old deer skin truck, and I introduce him, though with a tiny regret in my heart that he isn't Swain. They take to him immediately, and he digs into Mama's tray of chicken fried in bread crumbs, the best in the county. A horde of my kinfolks swarm around the white linen cloth dappled with bright embroidry work by Mama's delicate needlepoint, and my eyes catch a glimpse of Aunt Pauline spread out on the new grass fanning, like a fat cow lazily chewing its cud, and a secret terror creeps into me. I had forgotten about her, and I suddenly horrified. Surely she will discuss my last visit, I am certain, and Mama would find out that I hadn't stayed at Aunt Pauline's. Then, maybe not. I smother my fears with the possibility that Aunt Pauline, through her guilt of not asking me to stay the night, might fail to bring up the subject.

While Thad is devouring the chicken, I ease down beside him, on the opposite side of where Aunt Pauline is sprawled, and make my appearance as inconspicious as possible. I try and make conversation with a deaf old man from Durant, actually Papa's older brother, my Uncle Ezell Rose, and we are interrupted by Joel, who squirms in between us. I introduce him to Thad, who shakes hands with him with a drumstick in his hand. They laugh over this, which breaks the ice.

"Make it home alright that night, Tala?" he asks, would ask naturally, and I try and shush him up. He doesn't understand.

"Why you shushing me? I just wanted to know if you made it safe."

"Well, I'm here, aren't I!" I snap, underscoring that one word here.

"Nothing happened?"

"I've still got two arms and two legs!" I spread my hands wide in indication. "And my head is still on my shoulders, and I didn't get robbed!" I choke at this. Yet, I had been robbed. Swain had taken my virginity. Thad is concerned.

"What night, Attala?"

I explain everything to him, but leaving out Swain and Oakleigh, naturally.

"I think she caught a fellow, Thad," Joel teases, harmlessly. And I turn crimson. My face burns. My face burns. My hands become clammy.

Thad looks at me and winks, then to Joel, his eyes as mischievious as a child's.

"That wouldn't be difficult for Attala. She could have any boy in the country . . . if she wanted him."

"I want none of them," I snap. My eyes are blinded by hot tears. And my heart cries: I only want Swain!

Thad slips an arm around my waist. "Not even me, honey?"

I cannot answer, for Mama leans over us, holding out a plate of raisin muffins. "You children are not eating. Thad, had some more fried chicken. Joel, have you tasted any of the egg custard? You always loved my egg custard so much, and, Tala, what's wrong with you today? Nibbling like a wren! Boys like girls who eat hearty. How you ever expect to catch a husband!"

"Mama!" I cry in indignation. "I don't want a husband!"

The greatest insult a guest of a Southerner can pay his host is not to eat his vittels. It is a sign of acceptance, and Mama is no exception. Her greatest satisfaction is cramming her own homecooked food into some guest.

"This chicken is delicious, the best I've ever eaten," Thad boasts to Mama. "And I've had fried chicken at the Edward's Hotel in Jackson, who are supposed to be expert gourmets, and yours is far superior, Mrs. Rose."

This is enough to win Mama over completely, and to engage her in conversation for hours. So while she is off on a tangent explaining to Thad her secret recipe, I whisper to Joel.

"Don't mention that night to Mama. She'll have a fit!"

He glazes me with a startled look. "So, something did happen!"

We had always confieded in each other, had withheld no secrets, yet, I saw no common good in relating to him my night with Swain. But I did promise: "I'll tell you sometime."

To get away from Mama, who was way into, "dipping each piece separately into a boiler of hot grease," I pretend I'm starving for water, and interrupting them, go with Thad and Joel down the hill to the spring.

The little winding red path to the spring is edged with soft patches of moss and violets, dogwood dapples with white splendor the lower green regions, and redbud haunts the limbs high up with a mist of lavender. Indian Pinks and Bloodroot pierce the covey of new mint-green leaves with fiery flames, like parade plumes, and purple passion flowers, with their biblical significance, bow down their weak lines over the path with their weight, through which we three pass gaily, like young deer in a dark wood.

Around the spring, along the red sand banks, the young set is gathered, and shrill laughter, girlish giggles, masculine yells (like the Rebel yell) rends the balmy air and flings sound to the top of the trees where birds, startled by the commotion flutter and quarrel and flee to safer branches.

Thad goes down into the wet sand, for he is wearing buff boots, and brings back a cup full for me. And as I lift it to my lips, my eyes scanning the top of the heads of the young crowd, I see Swain standing but a few yards away . . . and he is watching me.

Speaking of the devil!

He is watching me with those clear crystal eyes of his, half-amused, half-angered, and, like those other giddy girls at school, I all but faint. I hate hyself for this and force myself to focus all my attention on Thad, who absorbs my every gesture, and carry on a false charade, a coquettry, like the hussy I am.

"Who is that guy you were looking at?" he asks directly, his blue eyes on mine burning a hole in my brain. Like most Southern boys, he is hot blooded, quick to anger, with a hair-trigger temper, especially over some girl, and nothing can be aroused, nor enraged more than Southern youth in rivalry or conquest of the opposite sex.

"He's Swain Tamblyn," I answer as casual as I can.

"Handsome Devil!" Thad remarks, cutting him a sharp eye. "But notorious . . . a killer with the girls!"

I am shocked at Thad saying this, and I ask: "Do you know him?"

"I've met him," he answers coldly, between tightly set teeth. "He's a sarcastic bastard . . . lives at Oakleigh. I met him at Starkville last football season at the homecoming game. Had a girl on each arm."

"He's got one now," Joel comments, as if a girl is a forbidden thing.

I jerk my eyes round. Too late now to use cunning, guile. I had to see who she was, who held his interest momentarily, like I had held it once, oh! so transiently. A pain catches at my heart.

The girl is dark, almost coffee colored, and a shroud of jet black hair tumbles wildly over her shoulders, over her white crinoline dress which accents, to a fault, her dark skin. Pretty, I think, but nigrescent.

"Who is she?"

"Mildred Flores . . . I believe she is called," Thad answers. "A Spanish-Mexican girl. Many are brought here every fall from Mexico to be hired out as cotton pickers."

"But this isn't cotton picking time," I cry out in protest, in my own defense of this startingly velvet soft-skinned girl, this Mexican Cybelle.

"Ha!" mocks Joel. "You get the idea."

Then Thad adds low, but hurtingly.

"But why did he bring her here . . . to church?"

For me . . . the day is ruined.

Chapter Three

Thad came to visit me often after that dinner on the ground at Doty Springs Church. And I allowed him to court me, mainly because Mama and Papa were so fond of him, for Swain had my heart, my body . . . if he wanted it . . . and would always have it, though, too, I did like Thad. His kindness, his sincerity, his attention sorely needed.

He seemed to enjoy himself at our house, regardless of what he was doing, if it was sitting and talking to Papa about the war, of Japan's conquest into Peking, of Chiang Kai-Shek, and Churchill and the Czech crisis, which he had foretold, of his warning Britain of her danger (our most cherished Ally), of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, of fifteen million unemployed Americans, of W.P.A., whose funds were spent on dams, roads, schools, athletic fields, lifting a depression stricken people from the doldrums of meager relief, or back in the kitchen helping Mama douse hot doughnuts in sugar, or in the living room with me playing the victrola, usually the latest of Jimmy Rogers, or the hilarious Three Black Crows.

If he found us working, coming slowly up the hill in his shiny remodeled 1926 Kissel convertible with its yellow and black sides and spoke wheels, he would eagerly lend a hand: setting out sweet potato sprouts, watering the new corn, pruning tomato plants, making new flower beds, with limerock as borders, on occasion assisting Papa with the garden ploughing. We had a big garden that year and, because of a dry spell in the middle western states, food prices were up, and we were hopeful of extra cash from our garden output in the farmers market in Kosciusko.

Sometimes he brought along his sketch pad and pastels and did quick landscapes, our old house with its clapboard siding, the barn with the horses milling about, our dog Bruno, and vases of flowers for Mama.

One bright sunny Sunday, during late afternoon, he and I go out riding on two of Papa's best horses, me on Dusty and him on the dappled Mr. Lincoln.

We sit out on a grassed over pasture hill while he makes a pastel sketch of me. The sun is at four o'clock in the West, its bright rays bursting through the wall of trees on the far away meadows, and there is a stillness about us like the serenity of a benediction. At Ethel the church bells are ringing, softly on our ears, and with their sounds saffron peace. Cows are grazing down in the valley by the pond, and there is a subdued tingling of the bell aswing on the lead jersey as she gobbles grass. On a knoll next to ours, Papa's sheep graze contentedly, on clover as unsubstantial as gauze, their long shadows creeping behind them. Somewhere, a dog barks faintly, breaking the stillness.

Thad puts down his sketch pad and comes and sits down beside me. My Japanese yellow skirt, with prints of purple and white Iris on it, is spread out around me, with only six inches of my polished riding boots showing. His strong brown arm goes around me. He tries to kiss me.

"Don't, Thad," I cry out, annoyed, for I am watching a horse and rider skirting a far hill. I think it is Swain looking for me.

"Why, Tala ... why?" he cries, his voice deep guttural. It comes from way down within him, like a lost voice crying from a well.

"Mama wouldn't like it," I answer with a lie, not looking at him.

"What an excuse," he grunts. "I think Mrs. Rose wouldn't care, if it was me kissing you." He jerks up a handful of grass and tosses it to the evening breeze. The blades go off down the hill and vanish in the emerald carpet.

"Ha! Mama can be fierce when she wants to be. She doesn't like boys who are fresh."

He points a ridiculing finger in his chest.

"Me ... fresh! My God, Tala! Who in the world could say that I've been fresh with you?"

This is true. He has never tried to touch me, to kiss me, to even put his arm around me till now. Nothing but friendliness ... like a brother might regard a sister.

"I didn't accuse you, Thad," I say, apologetic.

"Well, it's the same thing," he yelps, waving an arm. "You act like I've got poison oak or something."

"It's not that bad."

"Don't you like me, Tala?"

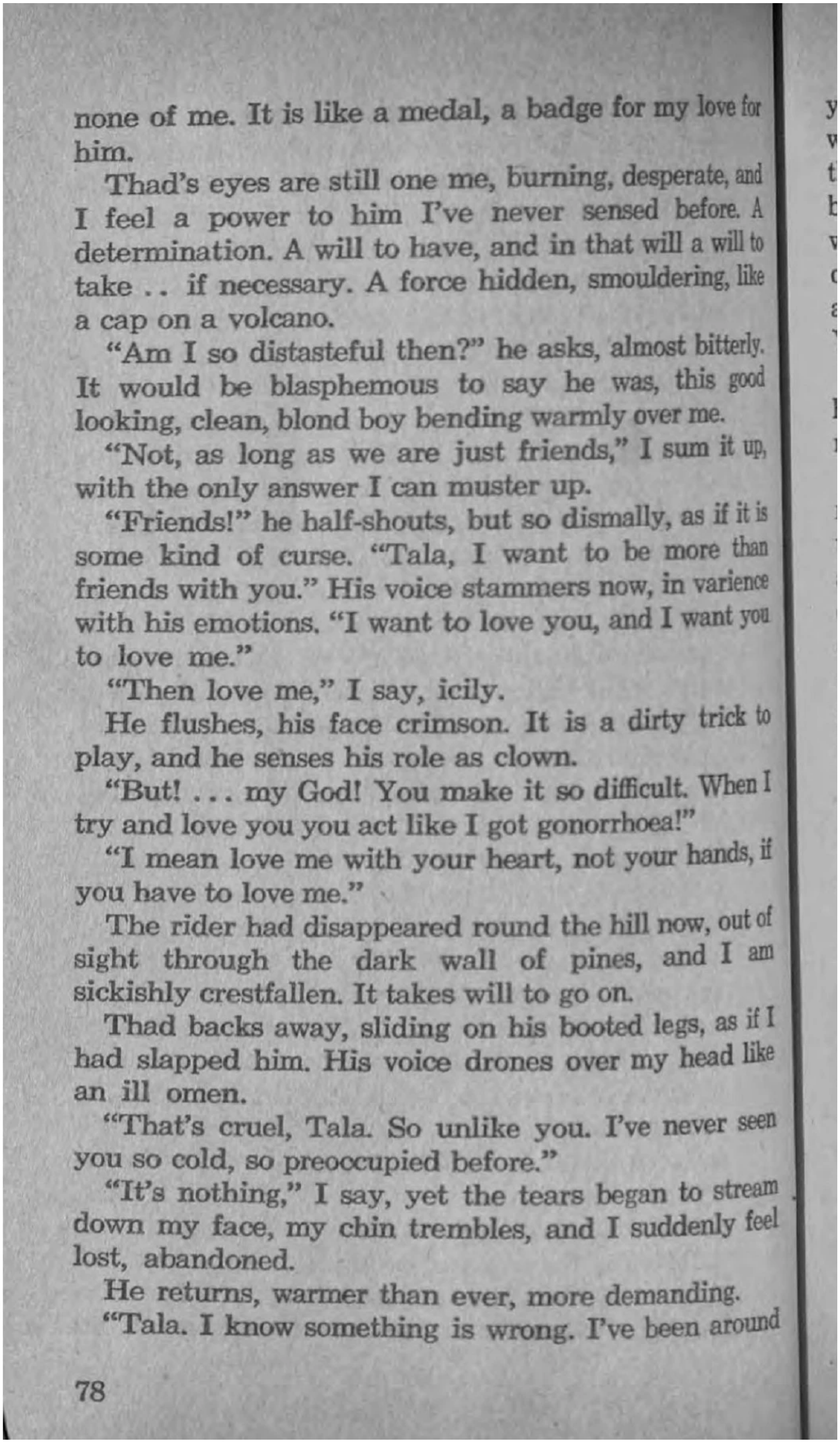
His eyes are deeply serious, pleadingly on mine as I raise my head and look at him.

"Of course I like you, Thad. If I didn't I wouldn't let you come and see me."

"Then ... what's wrong?"

"Nothing!"

I cannot stand to be touched by anyone but Swain. It is my way of being loyal, even if he wants loyalty or not. I can live on this, somehow, can gain strength from it somehow, though I think miserably he wants



none of me. It is like a medal, a badge for my love for him.

Thad's eyes are still one me, burning, desperate, and I feel a power to him I've never sensed before. A determination. A will to have, and in that will a will to take .. if necessary. A force hidden, smouldering, like a cap on a volcano.

"Am I so distasteful then?" he asks, almost bitterly. It would be blasphemous to say he was, this good looking, clean, blond boy bending warmly over me.

"Not, as long as we are just friends," I sum it up, with the only answer I can muster up.

"Friends!" he half-shouts, but so dismally, as if it is some kind of curse. "Tala, I want to be more than friends with you." His voice stammers now, in varience with his emotions. "I want to love you, and I want you to love me."

"Then love me," I say, icily.

He flushes, his face crimson. It is a dirty trick to play, and he senses his role as clown.

"But! . . . my God! You make it so difficult. When I try and love you you act like I got gonorrhoea!"

"I mean love me with your heart, not your hands, if you have to love me."

The rider had disappeared round the hill now, out of sight through the dark wall of pines, and I am sickishly crestfallen. It takes will to go on.

Thad backs away, sliding on his booted legs, as if I had slapped him. His voice drones over my head like an ill omen.

"That's cruel, Tala. So unlike you. I've never seen you so cold, so preoccupied before."

"It's nothing," I say, yet the tears began to stream down my face, my chin trembles, and I suddenly feel lost, abandoned.

He returns, warmer than ever, more demanding.

"Tala. I know something is wrong. I've been around ou too long not to know something about you, your ays, your personality, and you've never been like his, ever. Something is making you cry. Something is othering you, and bothering you very much, or you ouldn't be carrying on like this. And to see you rying, like this, makes me want to grab you in my rms and hold you and kiss you forever. But, God! You won't let me . . Why?"

He holds out his hands, his fingers wide spread, and e coils them and recoils them, as they shake maddeningly.

I see his pleading eyes, which have trapped and reflected the clouds, his crouching body, his hands out to me groping the air, as if the air itself is my body, and I think of my stallion Cisco, his body ripped in the entanglement of wire and, before I realize what I am doing have told him everything about that stormy night of my childhood when Cisco had died, the agony afterwards, the fixation of the male etched on my brain.

"When I think of Cisco lying there," I go on frantically. "Think of his tortured body, see his maleness, the blood, I think boys are like that, and I become afraid."

"You mean," he gasps, shaking abnormally, "that you think boys look like that? That you are repulsed?"

"Something like that," I answer shyly, uncertain of his reactions. "Hideous! But pitiful somehow. In pain." I look up at him, as if the blue fire in his eyes will supply automatically all the answers. "I realize all this sounds so awful, so un-natural to you, Thad."

"I don't think that at all," he reassures me, then studies for a moment, as if debating to himself. "Tala, have you ever seen a man . . . a boy naked?"

"Don't be silly," I cry embarrassedly, or, I pretend embarrassment. I had only seen Swain, but in the half-light, by a winter's moon, which made him all the more captivating.

He blushes. "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, Tala. But . . maybe you need that."

"Need what?"

"To see a boy."

"What good would that do?"

"It might erase the fixation you have about your wounded horse." He rises and slips out of his boots.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, my brain whirling dizzily.

"You say we are only friends, Tala, so no harm can come of this. We understand each other, and I want to help you."

He goes down the hill a few paces, where our horses stand grazing, and pulls off his clothes. Then he stands, with his hands on his hips, his shapely legs slightly spread.

"Now," he whispers, and without self-consciousness. "Is man in his glory so repulsive?"

He knows he has a beautiful body, a knowingness that is not of conceit or bravado, but a knowledge he might attach to a statue, or a painting.

I fill my eyes to overflowing. That I should be ashamed I was certain. Yet, I am not. There is a naturalness about us, an ease of togetherness we had shared from our first meeting, so it seems natural to observe him disrobed.

The evening sunlight, sifting in over the hill, lays its glow softly over him, depicting his blondness, his smooth complexion glowing warmly over his fine bone structure and layers of sinewy muscle, making his golden hair glisten, the curling fleece along his groin shimmer like that of the relic which Jason and his Agronauts fought to Colchis in order to claim. His maleness dominates his being, his body, as the race dominates the individual. And that maleness, so unlike my Cisco, is utterly without blemish, torpid for desire and procreation.

I see him there framed against the sky, more male still flanked by our grazing horses, beautiful, sublime, in a male world, but through the eyes of innocence, unwantonly, but as something untouchable, unmoved and unwarmed by human touch.

He puts back on his clothes and returns to where I am sitting.

"Has that helped?" he asks seriously, as if he has applied medicine to a wound.

"Yes," I whisper. "I think it has."

"Man is beautiful, Tala," he tries hard to explain, attacking a difficult and much misunderstood paradox. "The body of man is not the repulsive, secretive thing most people think it is. It can be strong and noble and clean, a beautiful temple to house his heart, his soul, if they too are pure. I am certain Jesus had a beautiful body. He must have, to have had a perfect soul, a perfect heart. And the Greek men were beautiful. Their art in statues tell us so."

"And you are beautiful too, Thad," I say with truth. "Thanks for proving something to me."

"It is I who should be thanking you," he returns gravely, that twisted smile breaking across his downcast face. He kisses me on the brow, but he never tries to touch me.

* * *

Afterwards, I did wonder about Thad, seeing him in vision, as I had seen him that Sunday evening. Though he did not arouse passion within me, not like Swain, I did feel a kindership toward him, an intimacy I had not felt for him before. And from then on we were closer . . . closer because we understood each other. Knowing how his body looked from head to toe, every minute detail, was like knowing a deep secret no one else shared, and he became to me the Christ-head, the image beyond the mortal image of man. I could go on liking him, because I looked up to him, like you see a crucifix in church, a naked man beautiful in his nakedness, because you know his heart is pure.

But after that, through some remnant of guilt, I am not certain, I have to see Swain. I have to fill this emptiness, this hollow gap in my life developed from our first night together. He is essential to me, more than his physical love, but my love for him, my desperate love I cannot kill, even with Thad.

I beg an excuse from Mama to go and see Aunt Pauline, despite my loathing for that woman, the only one I can think of so that I might get a chance to see Swain.

After a put-on greeting with her and Joel, and suffering a civil conversation through the course of tea cakes and coffee, I ride over to Oakleigh.

The lawn is in the full glory of spring—late spring to be exact for it is June, when I go slowly up the wooded hill dripping with Spanish moss, and the lawn is like a soft emerald carpet . . . as Mama would have described it . . . fit for the bare feet of Jesus to walk upon.

Late Azalea and Buddha Camellias and icy cape jasmine and gardenia are like miniature mountains of flaming foam beneath the trees, a bright dazzle of light, like Moses burning bush, where the sun crept in between the shadows.

Swain met me on the front gallery, as I had invisioned in my dreams a million times, and crushes me into his strong brown arms.

"I'll never let you go again, Tala!" he murmurs, kissing me again and again, on the mouth, the brow, the neck, slipping back my turquoise organdy blouse. "I've missed you so. Why haven't you come sooner?"

I cannot answer. A thousand years have fled since I had last seen him, and now we were as on that first meeting, as if time and tide and heaven had stood still. Nothing had gone on without us. So we, with time, had stood still. There were no days, no sleepless nights, no tears, no sadness . . . no Thad.

Thad was a shadow on the wall, a thistle in the wind campared to Swain . . . my Swain. I would love no one else.

We have supper together in the back kitchen (even Wroten seems glad to see me) and a tour of the grounds afterwards.

"He's been everywhere but to China looking for you, girl," old Wroten beams, when Swain and I go down the back steps and out into the back yard. "And cussing every step."

"It hasn't been that bad," Swain explains, as we go through the gate to the apple orchard. "But almost."

"I noticed at the church picnic," I say, with tongue in cheek, remembering all too well, and with rebellious jealousy, the dark Mexican girl, Mildred Flores.

"Well," he reminds me equally. "You haven't had any vacant nights, with two robust bucks on your arm. Tell me their names, so I can hate them terribly."

I tell him. "You've met Thad," I add casually. They are both rivals for my hand, and I gloat over this with girlish pleasure.

"Oh, yes . . . I remember." He glances away, moodfully. "He was a guest of one of my classmates at State. Nice boy . . . if you like nice boys."

"I do like nice boys," I remark. "And Thad is nice. Too nice actually. But aloof in a way. You never know what he is thinking. Can never really follow his emotions. It seems that when he and I are together we both speak different languages."

Swain gives me a side-long glance.

"He's a dreamer. Born to paint pictures and reac books and believe in a lot of nonsense that makes no sense what-so-ever. It is he who should be living in this house instead of me. Surrounded by all this beauty, mooning over the great volumes in my library, spinning day dreams while he listens to grand music. He's out of place in a world where men have to scratch in the dirt for a living, who have callouses on their hands, who suffer drought, and famine and war and hard times."

I toss my head until my ear-rings dance.

"I don't see you scratching in the dirt."

His mouth pops open, he stops abruptly, and takes my hand in his.

"Now see here, Attala Rose!," he says gruffly. "Don't be putting that Thad Sterling before me. I'm just making comparisons that's all . . . the difference between him and me."

"Is there so much difference, really?"

He shrugs. We go on down the path, past a row of moss colored cabins, once painted with white-wash, where colored field hands had lived while they worked the hundreds of acres of Oakleigh. Along the front of these, crepe myrtle, radiant in full bloom, sifted their petals down over us.

"Maybe we are—no different," he says quietly, after a moment's meditation. "We probably want the same things. We just go about them in different ways. Thad slow, uncertain, skirting . . . me, direct, impulsive, demanding."

I smile, filled with elated triumph.

"May the best man win!"

"Oh, I'll win alright, Attala Rose. I'll even go so far as to make the wager that he hasn't had you yet. So I've won already, for I've already had you."

My triumph of a moment ago melts under the slur of his words, and I turn on him, indignant.

"What do you think I am? Do you think I let every boy I meet do to me . . . eh . . . what you did to me?"

"Now, don't get your dander up!" He stops, turns me to face him, and plucks me under the chin. "Hell no, I don't think that! If I did, do you think I would have anything to do with the likes of you? You can get whores at any whorehouse between Memphis and New Orleans. You're mine, for my pleasure, when I want you, and nobody, understand, not even that wooden headed Thad is ever going to have you."

For months I had dreamed, had waited for these words. To be Swain's. To belong to him, body and soul. To be no one's but his! I melt into his arms, surrendering to his strong brown arms going around me, drawing me to him, all but faint under the spell of his kisses.

"How could I ever consider anyone else," I say close to his ear, drowning in his embrace. "How can I ever be anyone's but yours, Swain."

"You can't," he murmurs, his voice breaking into tremors. "You were born to be mine, Tala, mine. And no one shall ever have you but me . . . understand?"

"I understand," I answer, vowing my life-long loyalty. And I think numbly, as we stand there in the orchard, with tiny pink blossoms falling down around us like confetti, what more could I ever want, would ever want but his love, his embrace, his wild hot lips on mine. What could any girl want?

"You're staying here with me tonight, Tala," he says, demanding the impossible. But, oh God! If it were possible! "Just like that first night, understand? I've got to have you!"

Paradise fled in the stark face of reality, and I look yearningly up into his eyes, but pleadingly. "I've got to go soon, Swain, believe me. Mama . . . Mama will suspect something certain sure, and I can't let her think this . . . or ever know."

"I'll drive you home . . . when we're ready to go."

"What about my horse . . . Dusty? And Mama?

She'll wonder why I came home with you, instead of on the horse."

He studies for a moment.

"We'll tell her that your horse ran away with you, and that I happened by in the car and gave you a lift."

It all sounds so wicked . . . lying to Mama.

"It's kinda thin," I caution, my mind whirling with doubts and fears and certain guilt. "Dusty is as tame as a kitten, and—and Mama always told me not to ride with strangers, and when I come riding up with—"

"I bet she told you not to do something else too . . . but you did it," he says with a hoarse voice. His eyes are hard, suddenly cold on mine. "She will have to believe this. There is no other way. I'm not going to let you get away so easily this time. Besides, Tala, I've got to find out where you live sometime . . . might as well be tonight."

"If . . . if only we wasn't doing this to Mama," I cry faintly, and choke back remorseful tears.

Chapter Four

Our scheme worked with Mama, only in part, for she is so gullible. Had she been less trustful of me, had she loved me less, she would have been more dubious when Swain and I drove up to the house, telling our premeditiated lies.

"Swain wants to date me," I say to her later, when Swain has looked over the farm with Papa and returned to Oakleigh.

But here she holds firm, as I fear she will do.

"This Swain Tamblyn is too old for you," she explains, sitting on the edge of my popcorn ball crocheted spread, which foamed over my four poster bed like cotton. "He's in college, and you just going into high school. College boys expect too much of girls. Besides, Sister Pauline has mentioned these Tamblyns before, say they are a reckless bunch."

Damn Aunt Pauline's soul to hell!

"But, Mama!" I protest, stepping out of my wrinkled dress (Swain and I had spooned in his car while driving up) and into my riding skirt and boots. "They're rich! Why, he lives in one of those old two story ante-bellum houses, with hundreds of acres of land, and a stable filled with fine horses, not scrubs like we got, and he owns all that himself, every clod, every brick, every penny!"

"Money and horses and land and houses don't cleanse souls," she reprimands, off on her preachments of the wise. "If you're not clean inside, all the money in the world can't make you what you're not."

I pop down before my dressing table with a thud, and began to brush my long hair with such deliberate strokes my brow aches.

"He seems so nice, Mama. And he's such a nice dresser, so well mannered . . . and he wants to see me, Mama. He wants to see me!"

She is doubly firm, more set than I have ever seen her and, though I realize what I am asking is wrong, my desperation to be with Swain draws on my every nerve, and my temper battles my reserve, that cool reserve I had always managed to show in her presence.

"Of course, you don't want to see him."

Her words are like sharp darts. I had always been as transparent as glass to her. Before, I had not cared, for I had not had anything to keep from her. Now I had.

"Well, Mama, I do find him oddly attractive. And he doesn't have to worry about where money is coming from, like we do. It'd be kinda nice going with someone with money."

"Is money so important to you, Tala? Don't we give you enough?"

I fling my brush against the dressing table. It knocks over my bottle of perfume, my powder dish, and it spreads, like flour dough, over my comb, my hairpins, my bowl of cream.

"It's not the money, Mama," I say softly, fighting my outraged temper. "Other girls go with older boys boys with money who can buy them things. What's the harm?"

She looks at me a moment through our reflections in the mirror, searches, her eyes hurt, sad, and I cannot endure their sadness.

"Tala," she begans, fingering the popcorn balls on the spread. "The harm is in you wanting him to spend money on you. That frightens me. And that you want to keep company with an older boy . . . a grown man actually, if he's ever to get grown. That frightens me even more. I thought I taught you to like people for themselves alone."

"I do like him for his self alone," I interrupt, altering my tactics. If only she knew how much! Actually, his money means nothing to me, compared to him . . . Swain . . . his arms around me, his lips on mine.

She lets out a troubled sigh.

"You know, Tala, I do not approve of you going with any boy, not just yet. You're still so young. The only reason I let you see them at all is . . . well, we are so buried way out here in the country I feel you are lonely with only Oliver and me, and you are young, you act young, so it is only natural you want to be with others your own age . . . but Swain Tamblyn! In college! Now Thad . . . Thad's still in high school, and . . ."

"And just a boy!" I half-scream, seeing a picture of his clean cut face in contrast to Swain's, dark, sinister, tantalizing!

"And you're just a girl," she reminds me. "With years ahead of you to date older men. Now, while you are yet so young, you should enjoy boys your age, in your own class."

I am getting nowhere with her, and I go into a rage. "And do nothing but swing in the swing on the front porch, and read the Sunday funnies aloud, and play the victrola, and say yes to this and no to that, like I've got no sense at all! That's no fun, Mama. And that's all Thad wants to do."

She pulls a card from the bottom of the deck. Her voice is unfamiliar, cold, sarcastic, and I have never seen her sarcastic in my life.

"What is it you want to do with this Swain?"

I drop a hair-pin, and my hands fumble with my hair, as if each strand is loose rope hemp and I am trying to pull myself to safety.

"Nothing," I lie. But oh! what I didn't want to do with him! I suddenly feel sick at my stomach, and the first seed of shrewdness is born within me . . . as I think. I'll see him somehow, even if it breaks Mama's heart.

I did see him. But in secret. The same no doubt as Mildred Flores saw him, in the shadows, going down the lane after Mama and Papa had gone to bed and getting into his parked car, meeting him on the far side of the pasture where he waited on horseback, in Ethel over a fountain coke at the bar, anywhere, everywhere. He simply had to name the time and place and I would be there, following his brief messages relayed to me by a negro or Mexican field hand.

I still saw Thad, but for no other reason than to fulfill my purpose . . . a decoy. As long as he came to the house, I felt that Mama would think I was seeing no one else. I tolerated his shyness, his boyishness, allowed him to tease me and teased him in return, and kept his picture sitting on my bed table as proof of my affection.

He came every Sunday, went with us to church, and remained at the house until dark or, until Mama called me into the house. Sometimes, when the weather was pretty, and Mama permitted (her permission was getting more frequent now with Thad) he and I went riding in his shiny Kissel, to Ethel for church outings, a house party one of my school chums would give, over to spend the day with Claudine near Hesterville, a ride to the lake with her and her boyfriend, Travis Breen, to a movie in Kosciusko, and an occasional picnic.

Sometimes, when the four of us rode over the countryside, along the remote roads where houses dotted the fields, and people were out in their gardens or front yards to hear us, we would strike up with song, yelling to the top of our lungs Hit Parade favorites, Boo Hoo, I'd be Lost Without You, In the Still of the Night, When my Dreamboat Comes Home, Where or When, and the one we all loved to sing the most: I've Got My Love to Keep me Warm.

But at night, in the shadows, in Swain's firm arms, his hot lips, his hard body probing mine, it was my heart that sang to him, not my voice, and his love to keep me warm.

How maddening love is, when it is done in secret! As was mine and Swain's. He made love to me as if he was the first man, emerging from brutishness, pursuing his mate in a world all fief to him. He made love to me, not in worship, not for the sake of memory or melody or love, but for the urgent need of expending superabundant vitality. And that vitality forced on his nature an impulse to see me as often and as long as possible. So I ate up many of my waking hours planning, scheming for devious excuses to meet him, and to keep Mama and Papa from becoming suspicious. Many times I went through my bedroom window late at night to meet him down on the road, or took to horseback riding more often than I had previously . . . though I had always ridden . . . so I could join him at some secluded rendezvous area safe from prying neighbors: along an old Indian trail which wound through their burial mounds, below the dam of the lake in an alcove of willows, at Oakleigh, in his car parked on some outdated back road, once in a vacant negro cabin, in the cotton crib. Anywhere, everywhere we could find an hour's seclusion.

Thankfully, and I must add mercifully, no one learned of our relationship, or that we even knew one another, even casually, until my fifteenth birthday. It was August the eighth, 1937. I was then full blossomed, my petite body matured, my health radiant, my good looks taking on the vitality and spontaneous glow that sexual relations bestows on young girls. Sexing with Swain had brought my beauty to the surface, a physical reflection now, in my eyes, my lips, my hips, my breasts, the way I walked, the grace which enhanced my good looks in everything that I did. He had tapped that certain something within my young body, like nature that puts something of magic into a bud, and makes it unfold into a beautiful flower, so did Swain fill me the essence of maturity.

Mama had given me a small birthday party, inviting a few of the neighbors and a number of cousins. And after they had gone, Thad and I, with Claudine and Travis, sat on the front porch reading the funnies and giggling. Maggie and Jiggs were having it again. Maggie had given a musical, and Jiggs had hired city workers to drown out her singing with drilling machines, and we were having a ball as Claudine read aloud.

"My heart is like the raindrops
it's pattering for you."

These were the words to Maggie's song, and we four began to sing aloud, making up our own tune to fit her words.

Then Thad turns to the flash Gordon strip, my all time favorite, and we gloat over the present situation. Flash and Dale were in the water Kingdom of Mongo, chained to a wall in an underwater cell in the castle of Queen Undina. Flash was overpowering a guard, and the play of his muscles as he swung the guard over his head, made him all the more fascinating in my eyes. It was for this reason that I had always liked the script, this and the beautiful girls the artist had drawn. He was far ahead of his time with their mode of dress, the furnishings of their palaces, and was an expert on the anatomy of the human body. His men, like Flash, were so well built, so handsome, even the older ones, and all his women were strikingly beautiful.

"Thad looks a lot like Flash," Claudine remarks, leaning over the back of the swing where Thad and I sit, the Sunday paper spread out over our laps. And I think: She is right. Thad did resemble the blond athlete, though smaller in statue, a miniature of Flash.

"Well, I like that!" Travis frowns, as Thad gets all the feminine attention. "Don't I fit in somewhere?"

"Why, of course," Claudine chirps, giving him a sarcastic glance mellowed with a bright smile. "You can be Ming the Merciless."

"The bad guy . . . eh." he says hoarsely, then gives an ugly growl.

Thad puts in: "Well, Travis, you do have slanting eyes."

Travis's eyes were a bit on the slant, like an Oriental, due partly by his long black lashes and his brows that winged upwards with sharp black lines, accenting his sparkling emerald eyes.

"That reminds me," Thad says excitedly. "Isn't Flash Gordon the serial that is running now at the State in Kosciusko?"

We all agree. It was an adventureous serial which showed every weekend, with Buster Crabbe as Flash, Jean Rogers as Dale, Charles Middleton as Emperor Ming, and Frank Shannon as Dr. Zarkov. Though I missed many of them, having no way into Kosciusko, I did keep up with the actors and the events through friends who did get a chance to go.

Claudine asks about the main feature.

"It's Shirley Temple," I inform her, having followed the child's career since 1935. She had hit the country by storm, now only seven years of age and since, many children, under the direction of Norman Taurog, had come into their own on the silver screen. British Freddy Bartholomew, who played in David Copperfiield, Judy Garland, Lana Turner, pale pigtailed Margaret O'Brien. And later would come a little girl from England, with striking black hair and a chipmunk riding on her shoulder, named Elizabeth Taylor.

We decide to go,” putting the last drop of icing on your birthday cake,” as Thad put it, as we climbed into his Kissel.

We thrilled all the way through the movie and serial, at Shirley's magic dancing, and Flash's hair-rising adventures (it seemed every kid in the country was there) and as we hurried out of the show and into the lobby, swept along by the current of the mob, we bump into Swain flirting with the girl at the ticket window.

Seeing him is like a shock, and I can hardly catch my breath as I look, startingly, up into his sex-crazed eyes.

“You must have seen the show twice,” he says impatiently, taking my hand. He completely ignores Thad who is holding onto my belt in back. “I've waited out here for three hours!”

“Waited!” I stammer, looking at him then to Thad ... who has a go to hell expression on his face ... then back to Swain. “Why should you wait? I'm with ... I'm with someone else.” I say this softly.

He quickly draws me to one side, away from the stares of Thad and Travis and Claudine, as a gang of kids runs between us with a wild clatter. His eyes burn into me.

“You're with me, Tala ... always,” he murmurs determinedly, his steel-like fingers gripping me by the shoulders, his hot eyes on me, not with anger but with passion. “Let's go.”

My mind becomes a treadmill of desire and obligation: desire to go with him wherever he wants to go, obligation to remain with my friends and kin, who are loyal beyond reproach.

"I can't, Swain," I plead, my heart rebelling within my body, my desires overwhelmingly pulling me against my reserves. And I add quickly, before I relent: I'm with Thad. I must stay with him."

"You're with me. Let's go!"

His voice is more firm, more demanding, more overpowering over the weakness of my love for him.

Beaten, for I can no more resist his demands than the starving can resist food, I say meekly, crestfallen: "Give me a moment." I go back to where the three are gauging me with silence, their backs to a huge poster of Buster Crabbe in tights and boots, a ray-gun in his hands, Dale crouching behind a protective arm of his outstretched.

"Swain wants to take me riding," I say guilty, my eyes shifting to the poster done in a mint green, of that other world sunlight seen in so many science fiction movies. "See you all later."

"But, Attala, you're with me!" Thad exclaims, with a hurt look in his eyes. "You don't know this guy!"

"I'll be alright," I say, sensing his protective awareness. "Wait for me at home. We'll finish the cake and ice cream."

"But can't we ride back together?"

Claudine takes my arm.

"You came with Thad, Tala. It'd be impolite to, and what will Aunt Hazel think?"

I drop my gaze.

"I ... I don't care what she thinks," I whisper, hating myself. I did care what she thought. It would break her heart.

"You don't mean that," Claudine cries, her face a mask of questions. "You know she doesn't want you to see this . . . this Swain. Why, he's so much older than you! Surely your aware of what your doing."

"I know what I'm doing," I mutter, cutting Thad a hasty glance. His eyes, boring into me, are the saddest I am ever to see. And his expression is that of mixed emotion, one wanting me, the other loathing me for what I am doing. Together, it is a hideous face from which all handsomeness has fled.

"Oh, Thad! Don't look like that!" I cry suddenly, my voice pitched above the bustling noise in the lobby. "I'm just going riding with him. I'm not getting married to him."

"After this you may have to marry him," Claudine urges. She drags me to one side, the sharp eyes of Thad and Travis following us. "Do you know what college boys want with girls, Tala? A good time! And your hurting Thad, honey. He loves you so much."

"Thad's a boy," I cry, with disgust. I finger with my purse. I cannot look into Claudine's eyes that I know are burning into mine, cannot bring myself to face her and read what lies in her heartshaped expression, the goodness within her, the loyalty to friends and kin, her protectiveness toward me, her love for me and Mama and Papa.

"Thad is a man," she corrects me. "He is kind and thoughtful and handsome, all the things every girl looks for in a husband. Hurt him, Tala, and you may lose him. And this Swain and all his land and horses and fine house is not worth it . . . believe me, Tala, believe me."

I thought he was.

I think of him, in his arms, his powerful body taking his fill of me and, clutching Claudine's arm, I cry out miserably. "Oh, Claudine, I've got to go! Please try and understand. I don't want to hurt anyone, Mama, Papa, you or Thad. But I just can't help it. He wants me to go . . . and I must go."

"Oh, baby!" she cries, her eyes sharp with pain. "Is it that bad? "You've been seeing him, haven't you, Tala, against Aunt Hazel's wishes?"

"Yes, Claudine," I choke. "For months now." And I plead, my heart in my eyes, my whole body trembling. "Don't tell Thad. Don't tell Mama. Please, Claudine, do I have your word?"

Her face is a mask of concern, pale, lifeless, as if something deeply essential is being swept from her, and her eyes, bright as agates, clutch at it maddeningly.

"I won't tell," she says finally, but with the knowledge that she is hurting others in order to save me. "But how could you, Tala?" she says imploringly. "And with a man like that . . . that . . ."

She cannot permit herself to finish what she is saying and, on the tide of her bafflement. I break away from her, from Thad and Travis who stand staring after me as if I have gone insane, and to Swain's side.

"Took you long enough," he cries, placing my arm in the crook of his. "What happened . . . your guardian angels didn't want you out in the company of this dispicable swine?"

"Oh, Swain, don't be sarcastic!" I say, as we go through the dusk, to his waiting car.

* * *

With the ice broken now, the vile news out, this began a long secretive charade with me and Swain. More secretive now in many respects, but only to keep our relationship from Mama and Papa, but openly in another, for now Claudine knew and, as I suspected, Travis and Thad. Not that Claudine told them. Her word, as always, was as good as gold to me, but they knew, as both were no less exceptional than any other boy their age. Men knew things, instinctively. They could read that knowledge in Swain's eyes, as I could read it in theirs. And the looks that Thad gave me were not pleasant ones, nor were they of disgust. His, unlike Travis', was a hurt look, a look that went to his heart, his very soul, which was worse than Travis' cool, know it all gaze, or Claudine's look that did more to tear down my independence than the lash of a whip. Loyal to her last drop of blood, as was Thad, she, like him, kept her silence, and in turn she aided in many ways so that Swain and I could be together as often as possible without Mama suspecting. Not that she liked her role. She loathed it. But she preferred my doings to Mama's heartbreak.

She and I both had made a small sum off our vegetable garden, and we went into Kosciusko often, to shop, to a show, or to her house so that Swain could meet us beyond the prying eyes of my family. There were times she waited in a dingy little cafe for hours, until Swain and I returned from the hotel to join her, or sitting alone in some dull western shoot-em-up movie while I lay in Swain's arms, then relate the movie to me afterwards so that I could bland over my actions in case Mama asked.

Sometimes, on these all day outings in Kosciusko, Swain remained with us, taking us to lunch, a movie, or a ride in the country and, though Claudine got to know him in time she did not admire him, and preferred Thad's open heartediness, his honesty, his shyness to Swain's worldly ways, his persuasive attitudes, his rash impulsiveness.

"He only wants you for one thing," she related to me one day as we sat in the courthouse square waiting for him to pick me up. She was to see a movie, Three Smart Girls with Deanna Durbin, while he and I stayed in a hotel, and her unhappiness about the whole affair was visible in everything she did or said. On these times when she helped us be together she would not allow Travis to be a part of the outing ..." I wouldn't be with him and him knowing about you and Swain for anything in the world" ... she explained it away thusly, as if our presence shamed her and Travis, their mid-victorian relation, but I could not be annoyed at her for her degrading ridicule. She was too valuable an asset in helping me keep the company of Swain, and I did love her, her loyalty, her often timed silence.

One day, on returning to the cafe from the hotel, Swain and I found her waiting for us in tears.

"I feel so awful about all this," she said, after Swain and I had dogged her into talking about it. "I can't help but wonder—if Travis knows what I am doing ... a decoy for you two."

"Why don't you bring him along," Swain suggested, untimely. "Then you and he can be together more, can go to shows and things while Tala and I ... well, good God! You don't have to tell him where we are, what we're doing."

"Drag him into this filth," she said, sniffing spasmodically. "Let him become a part of it. Thanks but no thanks." Then she adds thoughtfully, her eyes, red-rimmed from crying, imploringly on us. "You're ruining your reputation, both of you. And it breaks my heart to see you doing this ... to throw yourselves away so lightly. You'll come to be a byword in this town, wait and see."

Of course she was right. We were being noticed. The clerk at the hotel was giving me a degrading glance when Swain called for the key, and in broad daylight, and the waitress at the cafe made untold advances to Swain, for she had observed our transient paths to and from the hotel. Too, others were giving us side-long glances. Women crossed the street rather than speak to us, and the men no longer tipped their hat to me when they passed us on the sidewalks. Girls my age gave me stare for stare, and boys a cool shoulder when Swain was in my presence, or flirted with me brazenly when I was alone. They even went so far as saying cuss words in my presence, four letter words to be exact, things boys never dared saying in front of a lady. One boy from Hesterville, a lanky backwoods farmer, even propositioned me in public, my embarrassment so acute I went home in tears, leaving Swain stranded, and wept half the night.

Thad remained Thad. Though he no longer joked, teased, nor laughed as much, that tantalizing side-ways grin, he continued to call. He bombarded me with gifts, candy mostly, ribbon, novels, became in time as obedient as a servant, alert to all my wants put up with me, my impatient tantrums, and acted as if no stone had been upturned in the garden of my deportment. I was thankful for his attendance, where I had been merely passive before. I needed him as a shield between me and the rest of the world, his kind manner, his loyalty, his clean wholesome attitudes about life, and when Mama began to let us go out more together, especially at night and on week-ends, I was elated. He became my protective Knight, and he wore that honor like a badge, forever at my side . . . except during my secret meetings with Swain . . . and as summer faded into Indian summer and then into the brisk colorama of fall, like a bright greeting card, we went to many movies.

As winter set in, it was possum hunts, and treasure hunts, and weiner roasts, and candy pullings, and bonfires round which we sat and sang old favorites.

To keep Mama's approval to me valid and for school book reports, I managed to read during the shut in days and when it was too rainy or cold to go out at nights. I was Cathy then, and Swain my dark Heathcliff, then the wild Dona Sol in Blood and Sand seducing the Matador, and Elsmeralda in the Hunchback of Notra Dame, then Salome, then the talented protegee Gosta Berling, and Scarlett, and Anna, and Beth in Little Women. I read them all, played them all in my room at night, gay, sad, cute, cunning, shrewd, facile, dying.

I wanted to be an actress. I memorized parts, played them before Thad and Mama, much to their glad response, and when I got the lead part in the school play, everyone jumped for joy. Thad, being an artist, inclined toward all forms of art, took a genuine interest in my acting abilities and coached me in my part. He read the male parts while I read those of the female and, with background music supplied by his album collection on our worn out Victrola, we went through our paces, with Franz Shubert's Indian Love Call floating in from the living room, or Rudolph Friml's Rose Marie, or The Vagabond King, or Lover Come back to me, or, more aptly to L'amour Tourjours L'amour. We even did parts with Dardanella bouncing from the background, or Make believe, Or Can't help loving that man, from Jerome Kern's Showboat.

Though Thad read the lines, coached, sang, swept me into his arms during love scenes, he was not Thad to me but Swain. Dark, sinister, seductive, persuasive, domineering, swash-buckling, poetic, callous. primitive, savage ... he was still Swain. Thad in a thousand moods, but Swain in only one ... Swain himself ... loving me, wanting me. If, in my dreaming, my play acting, I was the wistful Cathy and Swain the lustful, brooding Heathcliff, then, in reality I was the shy, dull Isabella and Thad the sophisticated Baron. If I, in the magic throes of my memorized lines, was Scarlett and Swain the reckless Rhett, then in the harsh work-a-day world I was Melaine and Thad the Melancholic Ashley. If I was Cleopatra then, in my mind's eye Swain was Anthony. If I was Juliet Swain was Romeo.

Thad was made of cardboard, Swain of living flame!

Even my dreaming of him, fitting him into the role, he was more alive in that dreaming than Thad was to me in flesh and blood.

Yet, despite my sexual encounters with Swain, despite his strong hard arms, his wandering hands, his hot kisses, I somehow too needed Thad, without knowing that I needed him, and blindly, without seeing or believing his potentials as an individual, apart from Swain, apart from the many male roles he played out for me.

Like the water or air, he was essential to me. He filled a purpose but it was Swain who filled my needs, who supplied the continuation of my life: he was the throttle, the ignition. Without him I had nothing. With him, in his arms, I was queen of the world.

Chapter Five

Had anyone accused Swain openly that he was ruining me. I would have fought them tooth and nail. But by my sixteenth birthday, under the power of his tantalizing influence on me, I was steeped in an uninhibition bordering on a wildness which had little if no control. He had made me, moulded me into what he wanted me to be. And young, impressionable, I had allowed myself to become moulded, each one of his actions, his power of voice, the love I had for him which he used for his own carnal purpose, left an imprint, and each imprint, however slight, had fashioned me into a girl grown before her time. He taught me to have a mind of my own, that I only had one life to live, and to live it to the ultimate, without quarter, without consequence. Because I loved him, worshiped him to a degree, I learned his philosophy and in turn used it on others. Vain, obstinate, self-willed, gushing over with life and good health, wild and beautiful as Attala county is wild and beautiful, I took life by the horns and, taking his shrewd advice, twisted it to suit my will.

I started smoking, an unheard of thing by Attala's strict standards. Even boys were expelled from Ethel High if caught chewing or smoking tobacco. And I drank beer, sipping it sparingly at first until I had developed a taste, then regularly. Every time Swain and I went out we would drop by some road house after our love making and get a beer. And I started going to dancehalls and lounges and bars. There were many such establishments scattered in and around Kosciusko, and along the main highways to Ethel and South to Carthage. Of course, none of them were elaborate, not like I would later come to know in Miami and Mobile and New Orleans and Hollywood, usually some broken down shack in a wooded area directly off the road, with dim yellow blobs of light showing through dingy, fly specked windows, or along some side street, a long narrow tunnel between two other buildings, with a line of tables and chairs down one side and a marred and liquor stained bar down the other, with a too-loud juke-box going . . . a new rage now in all the establishments . . . honking out melancholy tunes, hill-billy operas: Mexicali Rose, There's a gold mine in the sky, Love walked in, Flat foot floogee, I'm an old cowhand, Is it true what they say about Dixie, and hundreds more, new and old.

Swain never discriminated. Whenever he took the notion to have a beer, or to dance, or listening to the Juke-box, he would pull up to any one of these nondescript establishments and drag me inside. The Owl's Nest north of Kosciusko, Nell's . . . a mile east of Ethel, sitting way off the main highway in a clump of dark pines, a shack trimmed in red with beer ads in front, their `tin information twisted like crumpled paper by wind and hurricane, Jake's bar and lounge . . . a smoke ceilinged cave just outside Carthage, smelling of grease and onions where hamburgers were prepared up front, clouded with smoke and rancid from the odors of flux and urine from the two toilets in the rear, The Elite . . . operated by a dark Dago woman with tattoos all over her face, had once belonged to a circus, and who sat high up on a stool facing the cash register, her enormous behind spilling over the stool like dough, and the Delta Dance Hall, candy pink, with electric blue spilling down on the dancers from a prism revolving in the cobwebbed rafters, whose toilets were distinguished by the names on each door . . . Soft Tails on one . . . Hard Tails on the other, and which boasted on orchestra, four gangly boys with long sideburns who called themselves the Attala Rattlers.

"Swain, why do you bring me to such places?" I ask one night as we sat in the mid-night blackness of a dilapidated lounge bordering the Negro section of Kosciusko.

He shrugs. "Hell! I don't know."

"I'd like to go somewhere where I can wear pretty clothes" I lament, toying with my cigarette, passing it directly in front of my lips, like a veteran. "There must be better places than these." I say this in ignorance, but I had heard Thad mention several clubs on Highway 12 toward Sallis, fashionable clubs where women wore evening gowns and men tuxedos.

"It's never occured to me," he says coldly, draining his beer. He eyes me steadily for a moment, as if whether to tell me a kind, thoughtful lie or the absolute truth. "Since your angelic mother doesn't want me to be in the company of her angelic daughter I have to take thought for the sake of our privacy, and our safety."

I blink. He is trying to be hurtful.

"Then you bring me to these . . . these flop houses just for spite, to get even with Mama."

"I do no such thing," he answers, trying to smile. He lays a warm hand over mine. "It's just that . . . we can't be together like other kids our age, always hiding, always sitting in the car in the woods, in some deserted shack, never in the daylight. So . . . I bring you to these stinking joints, just so we can say we've been out."

I instantly feel better after his explanation, and the cracked windows with cardboard tacked to them to keep out the rain, the long streamers of fly paper hanging from the soot blackened walls, the dark furnishings, the fat waitresses with streaming sweat spoiling their make-up, the Frankenstein behind the crowded, noisy bar do not look so repulsive, so repugnant.

"Just so I know that you would like to take me to better places," I murmur, glad that he longs to show me off but can't and feeling something of abomination towards Mama for spoiling a paradise for me I could have had otherwise.

"Attala," he whispers amourously, his crystal eyes locked with mine. "If your mother didn't have such a despicable impression of me, if she knew me as I am and not what she thinks I am, then I . . . "

"I know Mama is wrong about you," I cry, interrupting, trying to make it up to him for her critical nature.

"I . . . I know a hundred places I'd love to take you," he continues, waving me to silence. "To Memphis, to Natchez, and mostly to New Orleans. Not to honky tonks like this, but to Antoine's and the Delgado art museum, and Beauregard Square and to the French Market and the Cabildo and Presbytere . . . everywhere, Attala, worth seeing. Places you never dreamed existed. Attala county is so dull, so uninteresting, so choked up with whores and farmers and hill billies and negroes and Mexicans and holier than thous."

"Like Mama," I remark, though elated by his fascinating travelogue about places as foreign to me as if they were beyond the ocean.

“If the shoe fits,” he says with finality, sharply.

“You're always throwing Mama in my face,” I cry fitfully, seeing, in the vision he has painted for me, the wondrous life we could have if it were not for her, her standards, her continuous restrictions on my life. Yet, spitefully, I know she is right, and it hurts me to the core to know this, and not admit it to myself, to Swain.

“Listen, Attala,” he says calmly, turning with his empty mug to order another beer. “We've got to quit bringing up your mother in every one of our conversations. She has her convictions and we have ours. And, until she decides to alter those convictions and permit me into her fold, you and I will just have to continue coming to these low down bars and drinking cheap beer and rubbing elbows and asses with white trash and half-breed Mexicans and uppity negroes. For I have no intentions of giving you up . . . ever, understand? Not if I have to take you to bed along with black whores and field hands and flea infested Mexicans.”

“I know,” I whisper, facing the awful truth. I realized we could not go on without seeing each other, regardless of the location or the circumstances. And I add with a sigh: ‘But it would kill her if she knew.”

“I know it will kill her,” He agrees, giving me a stern look. “That's why we are here, in this God damned hole in the wall . . . so that she won't ever find out!”

It would have killed her. I was slipping away, and quickly, from all the Godly things she had taught me, the things I once held so essential and so dear. Now, somehow, wanting Swain, those things did not matter. What good was being a lady, demure, shy, brave, forgiving, religious, if none of these things merited you the things you wanted? And each day, each week, each month, as I grew older and more determined, the less I regarded as valuable these things she had so religiously taught. And in time, with my desperation to have Swain following on my heels, I came to feel that the world in which she had tried to prepare me for did not exist, had never existed, and would never exist.

That world was for dreamers like her, and Thad perhaps, a world in which people, like elves, had little else to do but run wild through fields of daisies in the bright sunshine, eat pollen and sip dew, and lie out on your back and make useless pictures out of cloud forms ... not a flesh and blood world ... like mine and Swain's.

I wanted to fill my idle hours reading (I was half through Gone with the Wind now), sitting at my vanity dresser arranging my long thick hair into the latest styles, trying out new make-up, making additions to my clothes, dyeing my assortment of high heeled pumps various colors, doing my nails, exercising, giving my hair the daily one hundred brush strokes to keep it shiny, alive, practicing new dance steps, reading lines to plays, singing, mooning over Swain.

I wanted to play the victrola and the radio (Papa had his Grand Ole Opera every Saturday night, Mama had her Stella Dallas, and I had Sophie Tucker each evening after school, and a daily serial called The Island of Uclidia), thumb through my picture album, my huge collection of Flash Gordon funnies ... Flash and Dale were in the forest kingdom of Barin and Aura now, fighting harpy bats ..., keep up with Tillie the Toiler, and Boots, whose paper doll cut outs had her wearing dresses which resembled butterflies and her hair like Jean Harlow's, and Princess Aleta in Prince Valiant. And I wanted to ride my horse, go to parties, giggle about past dates with Claudine, go steady with Thad, and wallow with Swain. And I did all these things.

I did them with the anticipation, the zest, the glory, and the greed of a girl of sixteen, in order or out of order, whatever whim suited me most at the time, and I did little or nothing of what I did not want to do, regardless what Mama said.

And she said much. Her ambition to mould me into something useful resulted in a continuous task on her part, and she never tired. Though she was immensely happy over my craze for acting, my occupation with clothes, my looks, my deportment, she was constantly at variance with her sisters and nieces about the way I conducted myself in public.

"Attala will be dying her hair next and painting her eyes," I overheard Aunt Pauline say to Mama one afternoon as they sat in the living room stitching at a patchwork quilt which hung before them in a taut frame suspended from the ceiling.

"She's just full of life, Pauline," Mama said with firmness, defending me ultimately but, without doubt, wearing that hurt all over look she always wore in front of any of her sisters when they were upbraiding her about something I had said or done. "If Tala decides to wear her hair a different color I'm certain it'll be for a practical reason. She's only being theatrical! Why, look at Greta Garbo, and Harlow, and Mary Boland, and Joan Crawford."

"You look!" Aunt Pauline says icily, puffing up like a frog. "We are not fancy actresses here. We are farmers, living in the hills!"

"What's dyeing your hair got to do with your soul?" Mama says, determined, her eyes in agony scanning the patchwork quilt, her lower lip trembling, I am certain, though I am in my own room, beyond their prying eyes, as it always trembled when those she loved said unkind things.

Aunt Pauline is ready and waiting with her reply.

"It's got everything to do with it. Decent people do only decent things, and dyeing your hair ain't decent."

"Well, wait till she dyes it before calling names," Mama smirks. "Let him without sin cast the first stone!"

Mama had her there, and I felt sorry for her at her brave attempts for my defense, but I knew, for once, that Aunt Pauline was right. Girls just didn't dye their hair, not here in Attala county. They were branded as prostitutes if they did, and nothing but the cheapest woman of the streets would resort to such an outward display of her character. I had seen several in Kosciusko, buxom, overblown women with hair redder than a pinetorch in a noon day's sun, their fixed eyes like glass, like the eyes of the mannikins in the store fronts. Any girl in high school who so dared to dye her hair, or even henna it, or so much as rinsed it in peroxide, became a laughing stock, scoffed at by the other girls and ignored completely by the boys, unless they could get her along with them so they could make open advances. I remembered Nelly Mae Blackwell painting her eyes once to look like those of Theda Bara, and she had been expelled from school. Of course, boys could do untold things and get away with them, playing hooky, having nigger-shooter wars, could smoke and drink, sass a teacher, gamble, set fire to the girls toilet, spit on the classroom floor, flirt with the teachers brazenly (one boy urinated in the drinking fountain) could get girls pregnant, could get into free-for-all brawls, could chase one another around the football showerhouse with nothing on but a towel around them, could bring snakes to school to terrify the girls, could steal kisses, and write obscene notes, could draw vulgar pictures on the blackboard when no one was looking, could steal lunches, and puncture tires on the schoolbuses with pocket knives, and, if clever enough, could get by with everything.

Girls had to toe the line, or else get themselves talked about. In a country based on Protestant faith, unwritten creeds, crude laws, and superstition, a young girl didn't stand a chance. And I was determined to alter all that, at least for myself. Like in 1920, with the women's right to vote, I longed to add another privilege to the list . . . the right to freedom of expression, individual personality, to be able to stand alone without being forced, through rudimentary dogma, to follow the floodtide of feminine behavior handed down generation after generation. Not that I wanted to be ruinous. I was not a Helen of Troy, nor a petty Hedda Gabler either. I had and kept my brand of standards, though they did not parallel those of my mother.

I wanted to be a great lady, in a sense, without the usual sacrifice which made women ladies, or, the essentials Mama would demand and require that a lady be, and remain, a lady. I wanted good health, which I had, good looks, which were not denied me, and a nice figure, which was undeniably mine, unless my mirror lied. Above all, I wanted to be intelligent. That was why I read so much. I intended to read everything. And I wanted to become an actress, an ambition no doubt instilled in me by Mama, who set the sparks within my alert personality and fanned my desperation into an internal flame. The thrill of applause, the glamour of gorgeous clothes, the triumph of success . . complete success . . began to find its seed early in my life, and I possessed that unmistakable meteor's fire that would drive me on, to fall or stand alone by its firey wrath.

I knew, without self-consciousness, that I would never have gone to bed with any man, had not Swain intervened upon my life. In that respect, it was he, and he along, who made all the difference. I had been enticed by other boys, of my school years and a number in college, and even older men, men who worked behind bars, in the lounges and dancehalls, well dressed men who owned honky tonks and night clubs who had made attractive advances, but the lady within me had made itself visible . . . the lady which would have won Mama's approval . . . and I wanted none of them. I only wanted Swain, and I gave myself to him for that one and only reason. To have done the same thing with any other man, or boy, would have been to me a thing abhorred. I had no liking nor respect for girls who let any man touch them that wanted to, like Maybelle Bonwell, Hettie Moore, Lily Brenson . . . who, it was rumored, shared a bed with her own brother . . ., Shirlene McBride, who had scandalized her folks by allowing an old man of sixty to come by and pick her up in a wagon, and Minnie, a prim little Indian girl from one of the Reservations.

Though, there was something within me, something of my physical self, which moved me, like a planet around a sun, forever vieing inward, toward man. I was a too female female, a naturalness within a female which needs no further comment, and other girls in my simple world were but rivals or enemies . . . with the one goal in life . . . the constant pursuit of men.

Anything of the un-natural, the perverse, left me cold, unsure, and I suppose for this reason I was a good judge of character. No one fooled me for long. For whenever someone presented me with naturalness, forthrightness, I was on home ground, and when I met someone without these genuine qualities, I automatically mistrusted them. I never trusted any woman, with the exception of Mama and, perhaps Claudine and Dolly, for woman is the mirror image of every other woman, with but one difference . . . her partiality to men.

I was ultimately partial to Swain, from that very first night, though other boys I did find interesting through my high school years, their hot, mischiveous eyes, their low drowsy drawls, their long lanquid strides, their cuteness, their primed boyishness, their impatient hands, their untiring energy, their laughter, their songs, their jokes, their tricks to get me alone, their wilful ambitions to take me out, their sidling and bridling to win me to their favor, liked them, admired them, loved them . . . and hated them, a little.

Loved them despite their constant talk of war, and hated them because I was not their prime attention.

And there was a lot of talk about war.

Brewing from their fears of it, their broken futures, the uncertainties of their life . . . boring, exciting, terrifying!

Now, in 1939, Swain talked of it a lot too, and Thad, despite all his gentleman-like efforts, brought up the despicable subject.

I hated it, mainly because I understood very little about it, and what I did understand was to me baffling and terrifying.

But this I did know, putting pieces together from what I had heard Papa and Thad and Swain talking about it, and from the newspapers and radio.

Hitler had long since taken over Saar, had grabbed Sudetenland, had seized Austria, and with his forces had taken Bohemia, Moravia, and even Slovakia had surrendered to his Nazis in March. Then he had turned toward Czechoslovakia with demands. Europe waited, certain this meant war. Hitler assured the people of France and Britain that the Nazi war machine would not be thrown against them if they would let him finish with the criminal Czech tortures, those Bolsheviks, those liars, he called them. But Chamberlain, heeding the Czech crisis Winston Churchill had earlier foretold, flew to Berchtesgaden to see the Fuehrer. Hitler had demands: the seizure of all Czech strategic points, rail system, and munitions plants. Riots broke out at 10 Downing street when it came known that Chamberlain had not defied Hitler at Berchtesgaden. Public indignation boiled over. Churchill spoke of Nazi aggression, but no one had taken him seriously except the English people. Roosevelt proposed a continuance of the earlier negotiations, which seemed too democratic, since that would include the Czechs and Russians, something Hitler would never agree to. Chamberlain met Hitler in Munich. Czech delegates were handed the plans for the emasculation of their country, and told it was to be occupied by German troops.

Chamberlain, stepping from his plane, announced:

"Peace is saved, peace with honor."

At the same time Nazi storm troopers were attacking Czechs, Jews, Sudeten democrats . . . robbing, murdering, wrecking.

They then made demands on Poland, one of England's allies. Nazi bombs set afire nearly every city and village. Thousands of Poles were sent to Germany and Prussia as slave labor. With the fall of Poland, the British war cabinet reassured the British people that Chamberlain was at last ready to fight Hitler.

As Japan broadened her horizons, when Vichy France gave her economic control of French Indo-China, Japanese-U.S. relations were placed under an increasing strain, especially as Japan doubled her power in the Pacific. The United States, while sympathizing with the Chinese People's heroic fight for freedom, made it clear that we could no longer view Japan's expansion without alarm. Too, with the small satellite countries already under Hitler, and England in the very opened jaws of war, we began to re-arm.

Though much of this I did not, could not understand as a girl of sixteen, with satellite countries, of whose weird names I had never heard, gave themselves up to Nazi powers, and the world was concentrated toward a central bull's eye . . . Germany, I, as many of my neighbors, did feel the omniousness of war, or at least the threat.

All the bombings and shelling and burning and killing might as well have been on the moon, as far as I was concerned, so far away it all seemed, so remote from the simple life of Attala County and rural Mississippi. Now and then some school boy would join the service, mainly to quit school and escape farm work, and seeing him again shortly, in uniform, home on furlough, brought up sharp reminders of the world situation, the awesome terror taking place somewhere, which could and might happen to us.

Swain, being from a long line of military men, talked of the Marine Corps constantly, and what he would do if War came to America. In fear of losing him to the service, to the claws of other girls in distant ports, in undivided terror that he might go off, do something reckless just to prove that he was a hero, get himself killed, I writhed in anxious dread.

One fall afternoon while Mama and Papa were in Kosciusko to sit up with an old woman dying, I saddled Dusty and rode over the scarlet and russet countryside to Oakleigh.

"Swain, is there really going to be a war?" I asked nervously, as he helped me from the saddle and swept me into his arms. "I mean it. That's all I hear at school, all the boys talk about . . . war! War! War! I'm sick to death of it."

"I'm afraid so," he answers calmly, as if he was not referring to war at all, but to some casual outing. "England is our most valuable confrere, and war with Germany is inevitable."

"But . . . I thought England owed us gobs of money?" I say in protest as he escorts me into the living room, as if by that one declaration the worlds problems would be solved.

"My dear ignoramous," he cries hoarsely, slapping me on the behind. "What's that got to with it? We will still have to help them fight the Germans, debt or no debt, the same as they would help us."

It all sounded so final, so absolute, so ultimately terrifying, and suddenly I feel irresolute, and out of my own desperation, my selfishness to hold onto the Swain, I cry helplessly:

"But if war does come, Swain my darling, what will you do? Will you truly leave Oakleigh as you've said? Join the service?"

"Of course I'll join," he answers, his face a blank, the sound of his passionate voice raking across my desolate heart. "Shame my family name by sitting here on my butt while the white trash and cracker farmers go off to grab the honors?"

"There's no honor in war!" I cry miserably. "Nothing but dirt and starvation and death!"

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Uncle Ezell," I answer lowly, thinking off the weary old man, deaf, old before his time and invisioning Swain helpless too, his fine body undermined by war. "He was in World War 1, a place called Chateau Thierry, I remember. God knows! Wherever that is."

"In France," Swain supplies the answer, looking at me thoughtfully. "One of the worst battles in world war 1. He must have been a Marine too."

"I think so," I mutter, not remembering. "I was but a baby when he came back. I can still hear him and Papa talking about it. Sounded awful, Swain. Hope you don't have to go."

"Why?" he asks, with a bid for praise, one eyebrow going up mockingly, his silver eyes dancing into mine.

My heart leaps. "Because I'll miss you, Swain. More than I like to think about now."

"I'm glad you'll miss me," he murmurs, taking my hand and drawing me to one side of the room. We stand before the two enormous windows, the light of the fall sun flooding through the yellow shades, through the lace curtains, and onto us, as if we are swallowed up in the bright yellow glow of Narcissus petals.

"Oh, Swain," I say longingly, my heart beating itself out of my bosom, as he gathers me into his warm arms, my face buried in his chest, his hand on my hair. "Let's get married, Swain."

He holds me at arms length and glares at me for a surprising moment, his eyes squinted with ridicule.

"Get married! What ever on earth for?"

The bottom falls out of my heart.

"But ... but, don't you love me, Swain? Don't you care?"

"Why, of course I care!" He brushes back his fallen hair, which dangles over his reckless eyes. "It's fun being with you . . . you should know that."

"Fun!"

My whole life passes before me in that one instant.

"Now don't tell me you've quit enjoying it, Baby?"

His laugh, though quiet it is, is bordered on hideousness.

I look at him desperately, searching into his crystal eyes for the answer I have failed to find in his voice.

"Is that all this means to you, Swain, that I mean to you, is fun?"

He picks me under the chin, lifting my face to his. "Well," he shrugs. "Not just fun exactly. There's more to it than that. I do like you, Attala, like you very much, and ..." He breaks off, flinching from my steady stare.

"It's nice to know you like me."

"Now, see here, Tala," he says more firmly, without mockery or flippancy. "You know I like you. Love—well. Well, what the hell! isn't doing what we're doing enough?"

There is no answer I can give him for this.

We stand there in silence, deep yellow silence, looking at each other. The room is so still, so utterly still you could hear a pin drop.

Finally I whisper: "Swain, I just thought, I just thought if there is going to be a war, and you going into the service and all, that . . . that if we married we could, well, be together always, and I could go with you." And I blurt out. "Cause I love you, Swain. I mean this."

"Attala," he begins, his brow furrowed, both hands on his hips. "When we started our little charade of sex I had not bargained on this. Marriage and trooping all over hell and gone. And kids and all that stuff. Aren't you having a good time? Why are you like other girls, all that marriage crap. I thought you were different."

"I am different," I cry the cry of the vanquished. "Different enough to love you and want you for what you are, different enough to love you, not like those others, but your heart, your mind."

He laughs a sullen laugh, almost a jeer instead of a laugh.

"You don't even know I've got a heart, or a mind, Attala. It's that body I've got, isn't it, baby?"

"Oh, Swain, don't be cruel," I plead of him, wanting desperately for him to crush me in his arms, to kiss away my sudden fears, but he just stands there staring down at me, and that terrifies me and leaves me numbly cold. "I do care, and I do know you've got a heart, a mind, a soul. That's why I care so much. That's why I love you so much. I know you as you are, the fine things about you other girls are too careless to notice."

"And I should marry you for that!"

I look for cruelty in his expression, but see none.

"No," I answer him lowly, prisoner to his probing, stabbing eyes. "That's not the reason. I'm, I'm just afraid I'll lose you, that's all."

"Attala, you're not going to lose me. If war comes, if I join the Marines we'll keep in touch."

"That's not what I mean," I all but storm, realizing I was getting nowhere with him. "It's your heart, Swain, I cannot lose, and your presence. I need that!"

"I need you too," he grunts. "But when we are separated it don't mean that you and I can't be with someone else, now does it?"

Something within me hardens. My spine stiffens. My body suddenly feels clamy, stiffling in this yellow room and, like other giddy girls, I want to faint, to obliterate my heart from all its pain, but I dare not.

"Like you and that Mildred Flores, no doubt!" I fling back, hating myself for being so openly jealous, so frank about my own emotions.

"And you and that Thad!"

"Thad and I don't . . ." I deny.

"No," he smirks. "But you would if he ever made the first move . . . and how quick."

"Thad isn't that kind of boy," I cry, defending myself more than Thad. "He doesn't do things like that with girls."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing."

"Won't he ask you to marry him?"

"Swain!" I cry, at patience end. "I don't want Thad. I want you!"

"Attala," he whispers, calmly now, his hard crystal eyes of but a moment ago softening to velvet. "It's no good. I care about you, hell yes, and care a lot. But I'm just not the marrying kind, not yet anyway . . . not for years."

He has struck the blow, the final devastating blow.

I look at him, my heart bleeding from the wound he's made, then toward the window, into the corona of yellow, as if I can see through the yellow shade, the pattern of lace curtains. My whole body suddenly goes numb, insistent to throb with an agony nothing but his love for me can erase.

I know now it is no use to thump my booted heels against the floor, to scream at fate, to leap on him, scratch his face, pull his hair, get back at him for humiliating me so throughly, for I know I am as much to blame for it all as he. What I got I would deserve.

Letting out a deep sigh, I turn and gaze into his moribund eyes, eyes from which all passion had fled, those not sparkling orbs of crystal glass that had burned through me in the darkness, robbing me, robbing me of everything!

"So, you will never marry me?" I ask once more, gutted with one last desperate hope.

"I will never marry any woman," he says in answer, casually, but as if he could bank the world on his words.

"Maybe I should marry Thad then," I whisper in retaliation, my head lifted in disdain, my heart empty, forsaken."

"Maybe you should," he agrees, his coolness exasperating. "But," he adds, his eyes filled with speculation. "Anytime you want to come here and shack up, you're welcome."

Chapter Six

That Christmas Thad invited me to visit him, his mother and Aunt in Sallis. Mama predicted there was something big in the invitation, but I couldn't have cared less. My heart broken, my whole concept of life bruised, disillusioned over the unpredicted turn of events over my asking Swain that we should get married, I felt I had absolutely nothing to live for.

I had gone to Swain with joy in my heart, never dreaming he would spurn my proposal, believing to the ultimate that he loved me as I loved him. Now I knew he wanted me the same as he wanted that Mexican girl Mildred Flores, and with no more impetus. I was a body to give him pleasure, a female, and he took me as a fillip to his enormous appetite, without love, without affection, though affection was a great source of his love-making, his unforgettable charm.

He had taken me, used me, caused me shame and degradation, and had cast me aside with the nonchalance of a child discarding a torn doll.

Yet, I still loved him. And his rejection made me love him even more, now that I would have to double my efforts to win him over, if I was to win him at all.

I drooped. I was miserable at school, when once I had loved it. I had always been good in literature and history, my favorite subjects, and almost daily my history teacher kept a radio turned to news of the war, which added wretchedly to my acute unhappiness and constantly brought to mind, with new painful wounds, thoughts of Swain, impossible thoughts of Swain!

I went out for basketball, but failed to make the team. "You're not concentrating, Tala," my coach informed me apologetically. "It's not all physical, you know. It's taking brain work and adding it to your physical potential . . . lots of brain work, girl."

I skipped poetry reading, for I could not endure without tears the tragic Prisoner of Chillon, and Saram and Rustom, both gripped in war and death and heartbreak, which pricked my already tortured heart, my already predestined burden of grief.

I became cross with other students, even my teachers, where once, because of my good health and natural beauty . . . of which I was doubly proud, I could be pleasant at all. Now, no one ever said or did anything of the remotest importance or, if they did, I failed to take notice. My mind and heart were at Oakleigh, my life over at sixteen.

But when Thad invited me to meet his mother and his Aunt Sibille McCool. I galvanized myself into action. Perhaps Mama was right. He might be planning a proposal and, if Swain heard . . . if Swain heard! Surely . . . surely it would jolt him out of his doldrums and he would come to me running, in a fit of jealousy. But would he? I thought of our last meeting, every word we had spoken to each other, every gaze, every wing-beat of my heart. Slim chance that he would even care. But he must care, my heart cried, he must! How many thousands upon thousands of times had I promised that to myself? How many times had I lain in bed at night saying that to myself, aloud, awake, asleep, in my prayers, in my dreams, even in my nightmares. I just couldn't believe he did not care, had never cared for me, after all this time together, these many wonderful memories, and I would thumb them through my heart one at a time, examine them carefully, listen to things we had said, felt him with me again, drawing my body to his, partaking as he partook. He was that strong, had that kind of power over me, like one magnet has for another, as if he had put a spell on me, and that spell reached across the miles and conjured my thoughts. And how long those miles were now, how distant, how unattainable!

Pride, and the fact that he had used me, kept me from going back, though I longed to return to him with every fiber of my being. The very thought of him set my blood flowing, my desires raging like a wild thing in a cage. I preferred him to any other person I had ever met. Had he beaten me, had his hard hands branded me with bruises, his hardness to set my tears to flowing, I still would have longed to be near him.

My aspirations as mistress of Oakleigh, bearing his name, the mother of his children, vanished in that bright yellow room that beautiful fall day. With it my every hope, my one and only dream. If I could not have him, then I wanted no one. Yet, even as I thought these things, even as my senses obeyed one impulse and battled another, I was preparing to see Thad. My mind was made up to do whatever he willed that we do. He could have me if he wanted me, the hollow shell I had become, if that was what he wanted. My heart, no one would ever have that but Swain.

In memory of Jean Harlow's death, for I had loved her dearly, the tragic tenor of her life, which outglowed that of her screen personality, I wanted to wear a slim white silk gown. Thad had mentioned something about a Christmas dance at the county country club, that for me to bring along extra clothes for it would be a formal affair. This alone spurred me into action. I had never been to a formal dance, and I knew at Christmas time the club would be swarming with fabulously dressed people, the wealthier Kosciusko citizens, and many coming in from Carthage and Sallis and perhaps as far away as Memphis.

Naturally Mama protested.

"It's not fitting," she surmised. "Too slinky. You would look much nicer in ruffles." As was her way to detract from my loveliness, my naturalness, but which boys termed sexiness. "Besides, you will need a white fur piece to go with it. And all I have is that fox stole, handed down from Mother years ago."

Determined, we rambled through every dress shop in Kosciusko or, rather I rambled, while she and Papa waited outside in the car. Finally I located a cameo silk with red organdy roses on the front (I knew I would take those off) and a soiled fur stole the clerk said had been cut from a full length top coat and was second hand. I bought it instantly, yet having to go to the car and beg Papa out of the extra cash. I already had a pair of white high heeled pumps from the previous Easter, and Mama loaned me a pair of her old wrap around beads she had bought years before from Kress.

Though my figure was adequately slim with, as Swain had remarked, the right contours popped out in the right places, and Joel always referring to me as Jam, and Thad as . . . simply beautiful, I wanted to be as slim as Harlow for the role I was, or was not to play out for Thad, but for Swain's benefit. For two weeks in advance of the dance, I had one cup of coffee, one piece of dry toast and figs for breakfast, nothing for lunch, and for supper a glass of milk with ten drops of iodine.

Thad's mother looked to me like a red breasted robin, so enormous she seemed in an array of knitted shawls. A white, a casket gray, a cream, a maroon, and a dark purple cross-over. And she always appeared asleep, dozing by the huge hearthfire, her eyes half-closed, and looking like those statues without pupils, a mountain of flesh snoring beneath her soft nest of bright wool. But she was pleasant enough, spoke as softly as folks do in church, and fussed over Thad as if he had not been home in years, or worse, that he was an invalid and could not fetch for himself.

His Aunt Sibille was another affair. Young beyond her years, gifted with one of those sweet faces you must but can never completely trust, with a voice like silk, she spoke of the McCools and the Sterlings as if they were the only two families in the world, or the only two worth knowing, and she relished on cousins and second cousins and kissing cousins to Thad's and my distress. But she did know home lore, and hospitality, and she served as graciously as any Governor's first lady, with all the little accessories in their proper order, silver trays, spoons and knives and forks and napkins and every vase filled with fresh sprigs of holly and cedar and crisp, mint smelling pine broughs, as the gay occasion warranted.

The house itself was like the two women. It sprawled over a fine kept lot almost in the very heart of Sallis, two storied, bursting its sides with precious heirlooms, dainty in a sense, gracious, well, behaved. A house of starched lace, vacuumed carpets, marble topped tables, blousy drapes, like grand ladies in hoop skirts, knick knacks, what-nots, thin china and feminine statuettes, glass nose-gays, and wax flowers under glass cages, birds made of real feathers attached to pot plants, doilies on every chair, yo-yo pillows on every bed, sofa and bench, the smell of sachet, disinfectant, listerine and fly spray, even in mid-winter, and vicks salve.

No wonder Thad was so tender!

It was like living in a humming birds nest, soft, cuddly, a home straight out of the pages of Little Women, and I wondered how he had grown up without being just a little bit a sissy.

Thad looked wonderful that night, dressed in a black tuxedo with a wine colored bowtie, which set off his blond hair to perfection. And he knew so many people!

It seemed that half of Attala county turned out that night, the better half, and to make things seem more like Christmas, it had snowed two days previously, and a blanket of white lay like the clouds of heaven around the country club, a Colonial style structure with enormous columns, the tall windows ablaze with yellow light, and looked like an edifice out of paradise.

It was paradise to me.

I had never seen anything like it in the world, and I didn't dream, or dare to dream, that anything near this grandeur existed in countryfied Attala County. It was like something out of Cinderella. The dance floor shone like glass. Wreaths of frosty fir, with red bulbs blazing from them, encircled the room, and there was an enormous tree which completely occupied one corner. It was a mountain of varicolored lights, with shimmering icicles and silver garlands, and frothed with artificial snow. Down one length of the room tables, snowy with white linen cloths, boasted foods of every description. Expensive silverware picked up the crimson lights, along with the huge sterling silver decanters and bowls and serving trays, each reflecting in return, until the table looked like thousand of little red eyes stabbing the darkness.

Never had I felt so important, or so sought after, in my sleek white silk gown, which matched the house and the snow outside, as men and dashing young students, one after the other, asked me to dance with them. There were soldiers there too, home on leave for the holidays, who invaded me with invitations to dance, and for dates, and one man, a navy officer, who whirled me magnificently to one of Strauss's Waltz's, then again to a sweeping Valentino tango.

In Thad's arms, his rich odor of cologne taking me out of my senses, our bodies making fantastic shadows on the polished floor, we swayed to: In the Chapel in the moonlight, I've got you under my skin, You are my lucky star, Winter wonderland. Thanks for the memory, The way you look tonight, and many, many more! So many more!

Later, as we help ourselves to the buffet supper, he takes our trays and draws me into a private sitting room. Here, we sit before a blazing fire in a tiny, miniature hearth, our faces lit, my white gown all a shimmer, here where it is quiet, with only the faint sounds of the music pouring in from the enormous room, the dull monotones of people talking and, taking a small box from his coat pocket, he opens it and displays it for my approval.

"I want you to wear it, Tala," he whispers, his smooth, bland face close to mine, one arm going around me. "This Christmas, every Christmas of your life."

I glance at it with belated surprise. "But . . . but, it's an engagement ring!"

"Ah! Now how did you guess that?" he asks softly, smiling down at me, the way a boy will smile when his sole attention is drawn to the thing which fascinates him most.

I study the beautiful ring, a huge diamond, minutely. With a catch of my breath I think of Swain.

I ask: "You know what this means?"

He laughs.

"I think so. I've been thinking about it for three years. In fact, since the first day I laid eyes on you at Doty Springs Church—remember?"

I nod. How could I ever forget. I had just met Swain then, and my heart, my body was on fire for his love, his maddening touch.

"I want to marry you, Attala," he goes on, impulsively, his eyes beaming, like a love sick school boy. "I'll be good to you. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, even murder, if it would add in some way to your happiness."

"Even murder," I say, doubtfully.

"Even murder," he reassures. He takes the ring out of its box and places it on my finger. "Say you will marry me, please!"

I do not know how to answer. I study for a moment.

"What about your art lessons in France? Won't your Aunt be disappointed?"

"Hang that!" he says, surprisingly. "She and I have already discussed my art. With the war on over there, and all, I've decided to take art here somewhere in the states. Would be cheaper anyway, and the instructors are just as good."

"Where?"

He shrugs: "Oh, I don't know yet, really. I want to be an Illustrator, No fine art for me. That's the best way I know to starve. I want to illustrate book covers, magazine stories. Several Science Fiction publications have already seen some of my pen and ink drawings. They like my style. Perhaps I won't have to go to art school at all."

"That's good, Thad," I murmur, uninterested. I gaze at the ring. "That's very good. Then, you woudn't have to go away somewhere, would you?"

"I could stay right here and keep track of you."

I have a sudden pain of conscience. I wonder if he knows about me and Swain . . . really knows. I stall for time. The agony of my loss, the loss of Swain, still lies heavy on my heart, an open wound from which agony pours from all four sides.

"What about the two old ladies?"

"Oh . . . they approve."

"Really, Thad," I smirk. "Not your Aunt Sibille. I saw her give me the once over tonight when you and I started to leave for the dance."

"Nothing but envy, Tala."

"She don't like me," I add dramatically, waiting to be begged, I suppose. "She thinks I'm cheap."

At that, he sits up boldly on the settee, and eyes me suspiciously.

"Where on earth did you get such an idea?"

"Intuition, I guess," I answer, pouting. I fumble nervously with Mama's beads. "Everybody thinks me cheap."

"I don't," he says warmly, leaning closer. "I could never think you cheap, Tala, never. I flatter myself that I can see many, many wonderful things about you other people fail to have the insight to notice. You are good. You are honest. And not only are you beautiful to me, but you have also got a brain."

"Thanks loads," I remark, with the expression of complete boredom. "So . . . its my brains you're after. Thad, you are a strange one."

He laughs boyishly.

"You little devil. You want me to say what I want, put it into words. Alright, I will." He pauses, in proof of his inexperience. "Sure, I want your body too. What man wouldn't? But I want everything there is about you, Tala, really. Your sweet, kind self. Your damnable, too damned goodness. Your maddening ways, your complete sweetness."

"Is that all?" I cry and wave a hand in charade.

"Much more, Tala," he assures me, his voice taking on the deep undertones of passion. "Everything! I want everything!"

I look at him thoughtfully, though flattered by his praise.

"Thad, suppose I refuse?"

He chokes. I see that sudden flush on his face, even in the firelight, the forerunner of emotional despair.

"I couldn't bear it, Tala," he answers, after a moment's silence. Then he laments: "I guess I should have woke up long ago to the facts . . . the real facts."

My heart quivers.

I ask reluctantly: "What facts?"

His eyes are steadfast on mine.

"You . . . and Swain."

My hand automatically goes to my bosom, as my heart pounds incautiously.

"What about me and Swain?" I ask simply, my voice trembling.

His eyes are sad.

"It's been no one but him, hasn't it? Nobody else has ever stood a chance, especially not me. And the ironic part of it all, Tala, is that he's not for you, not really. He's not your kind. He doesn't know the fine qualities you have, and he will never know, if he lived with you a hundred years."

The truth struck home. I knew Swain saw none of these things, knew it now profoundly, heartbreakingly. Knew it when it was too late.

"If you cared for me just half as much as you care for Swain I would jump for joy."

"Would you, Thad?" I ask, though I read this in his face.

"I want you to love me so much, Tala," he says with all his pent up longing. "Not like you care for Swain. I don't even hope for that, but, if you will marry me, maybe then, maybe then you will care for me as much in time. If only you cared enough to marry me."

"I care," I say with genuine truth. It is good sitting beside him this festive night, tending my wounds, soothing the sad ache in my heart.

He hangs his head, his golden hair dazzling in the firelight.

"I guess it was a stupid thing of me in the first place, even considering that you would marry me, when its

Swain, nothing ever for anyone but Swain."

I think for a moment, stirred by this handsome person wanting me, needing me, wanting me to share his life, heartbroken over my tragic loss. Swain had never loved me . . . would never love me. I knew that now.

"Thad," I cry. "Would you still marry me, knowing about me and Swain?"

He looks up, and his eyes are like jewels.

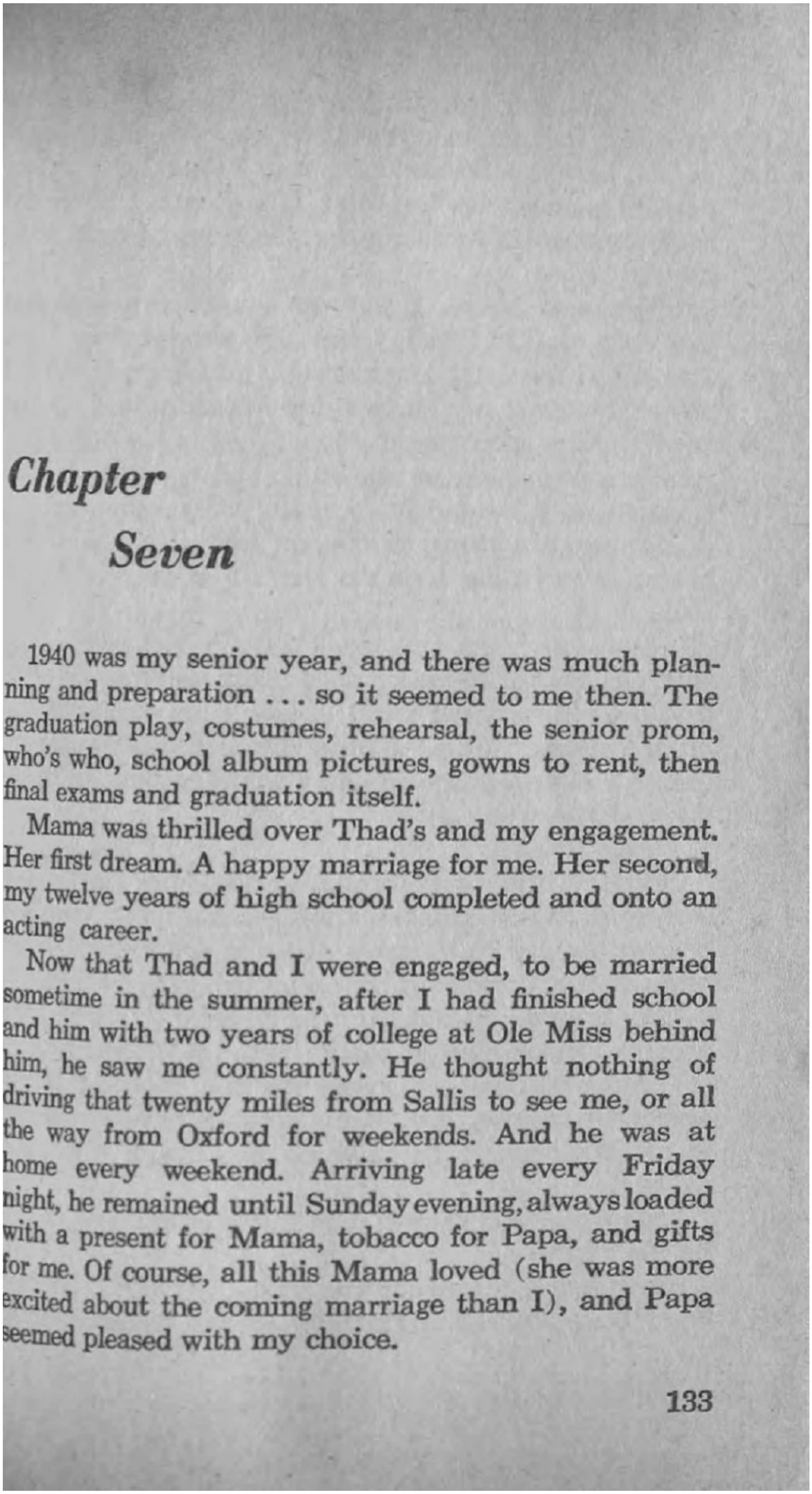
"Yes, Tala. I'd still marry you, regardless."

I look at the ring, as a sadness goes over my heart, like a hand over a grave.

"I'll marry you, Thad."

"Promise?" he cries hoarsely, all but leaping off the settee.

"I promise."



Chapter Seven

1940 was my senior year, and there was much planning and preparation . . . so it seemed to me then. The graduation play, costumes, rehearsal, the senior prom, who's who, school album pictures, gowns to rent, then final exams and graduation itself.

Mama was thrilled over Thad's and my engagement. Her first dream. A happy marriage for me. Her second, my twelve years of high school completed and onto an acting career.

Now that Thad and I were engaged, to be married sometime in the summer, after I had finished school and him with two years of college at Ole Miss behind him, he saw me constantly. He thought nothing of driving that twenty miles from Sallis to see me, or all the way from Oxford for weekends. And he was at home every weekend. Arriving late every Friday night, he remained until Sunday evening, always loaded with a present for Mama, tobacco for Papa, and gifts for me. Of course, all this Mama loved (she was more excited about the coming marriage than I), and Papa seemed pleased with my choice.

Mama and Papa pooled everything they had saved in order to turn me out. I had to have all the accessories. In my subconscious mind, I suppose, it was my way of making up for what I had lost. Trinkets and make believe in exchange for the Swain I could never have.

To please Mama I put up a good front, not that I wasn't fond of Thad. I was. He was the finest boy I knew, and the most considerate, and I knew he cared. I slaved away at my studies, for Mama wanted my last year to be a good one, the launching of my career that was to come after, so she said, and as winter howled through with hard driving rains, sleet, snow, and ice, and through a storm or two on into a radiant, foamy spring, everything took on the air of peace and well being.

Then one night late, as I lay in bed tossing and turning, unable to sleep, with coming events crowding my already troubled mind, I saw a car coming slowly up the drive. Its lights were dimmed, and it stopped under a clump of magnolias a little beyond the boundary of the front lawn.

It was Swain!

Slipping into my bathrobe, I eased open the window screen latch and climbed through. Hurrying down the narrow path, with the glow of early narcissus blossoms to guide me, I reach his car and climb in beside him.

"Been stepping out on me, haven't you?" he says roughly, which startles me at first, but then he gathers me into his arms and kisses me full upon the lips. I respond hungrily, and all the wounds heal over in my heart. With Swain I was at home . . . with or without his love.

"How did you know?" I ask, lifting my head before he smothers me.

He pinches me under the chin, playfully. "I'm not completely buried at Oakleigh. I get around. It's all over Ethel and Kosciusko. Attala Rose is getting married to Thad Sterling! Attala Rose is getting married to Thad Sterling!"

I am amused by his sarcastic ridicule.

"You said for me to marry him."

"You didn't have to take me literally. A man's got his pride."

"So has a woman," I say back to him smartly.

"Let me see that piece of ice he gave you?"

I held up my hand. The diamond picked up the moonlight, made tiny reflections along my fingers. He took my hand in his, gazes at the ring for a quiet moment, not saying anything. I think I can hear the paced up beating of his heart. It fills me with happiness.

"Mr. Thad Sterling isn't the only gift giver in Attala county," he cries bitterly, the sound of a voice, a sour note, as he opens the glove compartment and withdraws a small package. He tosses it into my lap.

"There, and don't ever say I didn't give you anything . . . that all the giving is on your part!"

"That's cruel, Swain!"

"I meant it to be."

"You've been drinking!"

"You damn right! And I had to come by to see my girl before I hit the sack."

"I'm not your girl any more, Swain."

"You'll always be my girl, Tala, and don't you ever forget it." He pulls me to him roughly, his molten lips going over mine.

"I'm Thad's now," I mutter, though I let him kiss me, fondle me, let him hold me as Thad has never held me.

"You're mine!" he grunts, his hand on my behind. He slaps me lightly. "Open the package, girl!"

Sitting up and straightening my hair, I obey. It is a bracelet, encrusted with huge spherical rubies.

"Eh!" I cry, holding it to the light. "Like drops of blood!"

"My blood, baby," he brags. "And everything about me that goes with it . . . understand?"

He fastens the bracelet on my right hand. It is so heavy it weights it down.

"And don't let me ever catch you without it, see!"

I am filled with indecision.

"What will Thad think?"

"To hell with Thad! He had his chances, and didn't take them. That bracelet is my brand on you, show everyone your mine."

"You've already branded me," I say, before I think.

He laughs.

"And you're not going to marry Thad, or no one, understand?"

"It's too late," I say in puzzlement, toying with the bracelet. "Everything has been arranged. And Mama and Papa . . . they have already spent so much money. I couldn't back out now, even if I wanted to."

He squeezes me.

"What do you mean by that rot? Even if you wanted to. Hell, you like me better than you'll ever like anyone."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell by the feel. Does that answer your question?"

I keep silent.

"You come to Oakleigh, live with me. Oakleigh'll be your home."

"Without a marriage license attached . . . thank you no."

"You'll come," he groans with passion. "Now, lets get on with it, it's getting late."

Dawn was creeping up the sky when I got out of his car and ran up the dirt path to the house.

A light was on in my room, and my heart skips a beat. Had I left it on during my anxiety to be with Swain?

It is Mama. I find her sitting on my bed, propped up against one of my enormous feather pillows, my comforter spread over her legs, for the nights were still chilled.

At the sudden sight of her there, and the stark realization of my guilt rising to the surface at last, I age ten years.

"Mama!" is all I can gasp. My heart flutters like the wings of a humming bird. I close the door softly and go to her. "Are you ill, Mama? Why are you here . . . in my room?" What a stupid question. I knew why!

"Yes, Tala, I am ill," she answers surprisingly, not taking her eyes from me. "The illness of heartbreak. And why am I in your room just lying there thinking, seeing all your lovely things, thumbing through my memories of you as a little child, so sweet, so innocent."

"Oh, Mama!" I cry, trapped, realizing she knows but avoids the subject. So I supply it for her. "All right! I was out with Swain. Is that what you want me to say, Mama? Well, I've said it."

She gives me a long, heartbreaking look.

"Yes, Tala, you've said it. You've said it and you've done it." She lets out a heavy sigh, as if it all suddenly is too much for her to bear. "I got to coughing, you know the spells I've had this winter, so much flu and all, and thought I'd come by and sit a spell with you and talk, until my breathing cleared and I could go back to sleep. You were gone, so I just lay down and waited."

"You didn't have to wait, Mama."

I pretend at being busy with my clothes, avoiding her gaze.

"No, Tala, I didn't have to wait," she goes on hoarsely, coughing spasmodically to help emphasize her hurt. "Been suspecting for a long time. But I never said anything until I was sure. Even when sister Pauline told me long ago about you not staying at her place when you were supposed to, I didn't believe. Thought it was some more of her kind of talk."

"Oh, damn Aunt Pauline!"

She goes on as if I've said nothing. "But she was right. You stayed at the house of this Swain. And I've heard much. In these small towns people talk, you know that. And my sisters ... at Hesterville and around Kosciusko, and all our neices and nephews. Tala! Why did you want to hurt Oliver and me so? To put shame on our good name?"

I choke, as guilt fills me with ugliness, bloats me with sin.

"I didn't want to hurt you, especially you, Mama!"

"I know that, Tala," she confirms, rising from the bed. "But it's because you've hurt yourself that hurts me most. To throw yourself away, to throw away all the things I tried to teach you, as if they've never meant anything to you."

She opens every wound.

"They do mean something, Mama. What you have taught me means more to me than anything in the world. It just ..." I cannot finish. I am too choked with shame, emotion.

"But why, Tala, why?"

"I don't know," I answer, blind with tears. Laying my head on the vanity dresser, I began to shake with sobs. "I just don't know!"

"Tala," she says gravely, quietly, coming to my side and stroking my disheveled hair. "I'm not going to jump on you, storm, shake my fist, slap your face. If what you have done has been the results of all my efforts to teach you better, then whatever I might say now would do no good anyhow. So ... why waste my breath. But I am going to say this, if it means anything to you or if it doesn't, I'm still going to say it." She pauses. "You've managed very successfully to break my heart, for what pleasure it has brought you, or for what you have gained. And you are in the process of breaking another's . . . Thad's. If you break mine you must, but don't break his. Thad's too fine, too earthly good for you to ruin his life, as you are ruining yours. He's too good for you now. Don't pull him down to your level, force him to live with you and what you have become. A whore, Tala. That's what you are . . . a Whore. And I'm done with you."

She leaves the room, leaves me to the throes of my despicable guilt, my undying shame. And I know I will never gain the courage to look her in the face again, with that knowledge within her.

Suddenly, I want her desperately, like when I was a little girl, when I could run to her with my elementary problems, have her ease my tears with a hug or a whisper.

I rush to her room, anxious to beg her forgiveness, to tell her I will never see Swain again, that I will make Thad a good wife. But when I reach her door I find it closed, and I can hear her crying softly to herself.

Chapter
Eight

I went to Oakleigh . . . to Sawin. There was nothing else for me to do. So filled was I with shame I could not look Mama and Papa in the face, could hardly endure meals with them so near me; trying vainly to make conversation, sit with them at night in the living room listening to the radio. And I shuddered at the idea of seeing Thad. I had wronged all my friends and loved ones for Swain, and it was strange I had not seen this before now. But his constant pull on my personality, his silent persuasions, his aggressive maleness, obliterated all my world of which he was not a part.

Aunt Pauline could in truth tell Mama now: "You see, I told you so." The girls at school would have a big laugh, and the boys would scorn, and Claudine with her undying loyalty would smooth things over with a saintly, sickening pretense, and Dolly would go out of her way to avoid me, and Thad . . . poor Thad!

Packing a few things in a suitcase and taking Dusty, I rode over to my new home (which could never be home really) without saying good-bye to Mama or Papa. They just stood there on the front porch hemmed in by Camellias and blood-red roses and

Jasmine and tall, waxy hollyhocks, just stood there silently, watching as I rode off, as if what they were seeing they didn't believe, or refused to believe.

At the driveway to Oakleigh I tied Dusty to a low hanging limb and sat down for a moment on a log, making my mind up definitely before I went up.

Sitting there, with the late afternoon shadows long and dark across the pasture on the other side of the road, my own shadow thrown across the tender grass like a church spire, I gauged my new life, the possibility of it, the worthiness of it; if it was to be at all worthy.

I saw nothing but myself smothered in Swain's arms. I could not see beyond this, like a hound on a chain going to and fro the length of it, so did my thoughts go up and down, then right back to Swain. I failed to see my budding ambitions as an actress, my mother's and father's love, their profound respect; the genuine loyalty and love Thad could give me in marriage, a home, children. I failed also to see the reputation I would make for myself in the community. Only girls like Maybelle Bonwell, or Lily Brenson did such things! Yet, I was blind to all else, running, as if down one long, dark tunnel which will end in Swain's arms.

Yet, oddly, I think of Mama back home, in the kitchen, preparing supper under the cozy glow of an oil lamp, of Papa on the front porch with the paper, and Thad, with his twisted grin, his mellow eyes, his deep understanding love and admiration. And I think of little things: Bruno scratching at the screen door when he is hungry; the low, steady squeaking of the swing; Mama singing, the mockers in the tall cedars, the frogs down at the pond at night; the cows lowing as they come up the back lane to the lot at milking time; a wagon going down the main road, its wheels creaking on the loose gravel, the church bell at Ethel, the bees in Mama's flowers.

Now, I had floated free of all this. I was out of haven and on the high seas. I felt lonely, as the dead might feel, free of the shackles of life. I looked up the old carriage drive to Oakleigh, considered it for a moment, then looked back toward home; seeing in my mind the Eden of my past, the paradise that must be my future.

Most girls would have considered living unmarried with a man, even Swain, at the grand old house of Oakleigh, a kind of purgatory. Oddly, I considered, or thought it, something wonderful. But instinctively, I did not, and never did, possess other girls' codes of proprieties. Marriage, childbirth, social life, community upbringing and respect, staunch church beliefs: these were never the ultimate goals in my life . . . as in theirs. Most country girls, especially Southern girls, spent the most of their childhood years harboring the ambition for a husband, a home, and children. I put all these things behind me in favor of Swain's strong bronze arms; his hungry lips on mine, his soft passionate voice, his reckless behavior. I did not consider my loss, or even if there was a loss. I saw only the things I wanted, momentarily.

Had I been like Mama, Thad, Claudine, I would have fitted into the countryfied scheme of things. I should have listened to the low, plaintive voice of respectability, and I should have honored the custom. But my ears were keyed, instead, to the wild, siren call of Swain's male hunger, and it was to him I bent all my attention. Even the church had little influence upon me any more, for it spoke of dead things: spirits, the Holy Ghost; and Swain was live, vital, electric.

Irresolute, confused, unsure of life (and who is not?) I remained on the log until darkness overcame the countryside; until I could see lights in the windows at Oakleigh, then I went up.

Swain welcomed me, which eased my bewilderment momentarily, and Wroten asked directly: "Will she be here for good?"

"Yes, for good!" Swain answered his voice a roar.

Then it dawns on me.

For good! Did I want to be in this creaking old house this museum piece, this Civil War relic, *for good*? With whom did I want to be for good? Swain? Thad? Some stranger still unmet? Thad did not have the greenwood in him, the lust of the earth. He was not of the tremulously ecstatic company of wild, hunted creatures . . . as was Swain. If Swain was antagonistic, the hunter, the pursuer, then Thad was neutral, an onlooker. Were either truly my comrades? They did not live my life. I would have to live theirs.

I wished at that moment, that I had never seen Swain; had never come to Oakleigh; wished I had never gotten myself engaged to Thad. What a predicament I was in. Engaged to one man, living with another. And when Swain said, *for good,* I felt, according to his idea, that he was paying me the greatest honor a man can accord a woman. He was merely satisfying a need of his nature, a need simple and urgent, like eating and drinking. And I wondered if it ever occurred to him whether this was also a need of my nature. Or, if he cared.

"For good?" Wroten adds, which stings me and confirms my decision. "Like this Miss Mildred Flores?"

"Shut up!" Swain bellows.

He turned to me and, with a quick, tantalizing smile, took my suitcase and led the way up the stairs.

He gave me the room I had used before. It did not seem so beautiful as it had on that first night; it was so eerie now, so full of subdued complaints and whisperings.

"Sorry I was rough with Wroten," he murmured, leaning to kiss me on the brow. "Welcome to Oakleigh . . ."

I found in one of the chests a frail, yellowish nightdress with many frills of cobweb lace made and worn by some dead woman on a forgotten bridal night. I put it on and went to the opened window where I leaned out and listened to the soft voices of the trees. I prayed. And when I was through, I asked myself:

"Why did I come here?"

But even in my answer I knew it was too late. I had turned my back on all that mattered actually, though I did not know that until this night. Now, it was too late to go back. I had cast my lot with a loser, all because of his wanton self, my wanton self; drawn to him because I was not strong enough to resist; awed by something I could not understand, except his need and my desperation to fill it. And I thought: how odd it is that things seem so attractive when you want them and so commonplace when they once obtained. *Had* I obtained Swain? Was this the thing I so maddeningly craved?

Then, I think it is. Here, at last, hidden in this old house, behind the shadows of these enormous moss-laden trees, locked away from the rest of the world, I could drink my fill of Swain.

He comes in abruptly.

He is dressed, immaculately in a white linen suit, which is all the rage this year, and two-toned shoes. His multi-colored tie is reflected in the crystal of his eyes, and in his wide lapel a blood-red rose gleams like a stain. He is surrounded by a mist of cologne, and his hair glistens like the metal on a prince's helmet.

"I've got to drive in to Carthage," he explains, taking me by surprise when I had already anticipated we'd spend our evening together in each other's arms. "A business trip, baby. Don't wait up."

Chapter Nine

Oakleigh was in its mid-summer mood. Roses wilted in the bud; the wisteria winding up and around the tall columns hung lifeless, the lavender blossoms drooped like dried clusters of grapes. The Bermuda grass on the lawn lay in patches of burnt yellow, like bright throw rugs, and beneath the moss-laden trees, under dark limp leaves, no breeze stirred.

The fields beyond lay parched, the corn twisted, dry, the grazing lands gone to weed and thistle-down and nigger-heads.

It is July, 1941.

I an 18 now, and have been with Swain at Oakleigh for almost a year. A year of both ecstasy and loneliness. I have become what he has wanted of me . . . his lady-in-waiting. With him, in the throes of his passion, life is what is supposed to be, at least to him, and life without him is acute boredom. There is nothing to do, except be prepared to go to bed with him when he wants me to. And he has an enormous sexual appetite. All else has become a sordid vacuum.

"Damn! What's any woman good for between sunup and sundown," he philosphizes. "It's nights when they come in handy."

Whenever I am blue, and need an extra sparkle to life, and ask him about marriage he answers: "Marriage destroys the mind."

And so, that is the way it is left. I enjoy the privilege of living under his roof, sharing his beautiful furniture, the grounds, eating his splendid food, which Wroten is a master at preparing. This I get in exchange for giving him pleasure in bed. Yet, despite his independence, and his social neglect of me, despite even the times when he isn't civil, I still want him, love him. After all the months with him he has become completely essential to me.

With Swain gone most of the daytime, and Wroten to do all the house cleaning and cooking, I roam about the place, riding Dusty on long afternoon jaunts into the back woods, or just sitting out on some bare hill, like Mama and I use to do, day dreaming, forming cloud pictures, wondering what's going on at home.

I can close my eyes, especially when I smell the rich scent of wild rose and geranium in the sun-drenched fields, and see everything going on at home: Papa coming from the barn after milking time, his bucket sloshing over, the cats and Bruno trailing behind to lap up the foam; Mama in the kitchen rolling out dough, humming softly, or on late evenings, out on the front porch watering her pot plants; later both in their favorite rockers, the floor squeaking under their weight, the radio whining out some Grand Ole Op-ry tune, the oil lamp sending out its multitude of shadows. And the rain, too. How I loved to sit on the edge of the front porch, my feet dangling, and watch it come down; making tiny rivers of the paths to the road and to the barn; tapping the maroon heads of dahlias which bordered the porch; beating away the petals of the roses, like Swain's love beating away at my heart. And how the wind would lift the wet limbs of the trees, shake the leaves until they trembled, and bring them down, like reapers in fields of corn. And I can smell raisin muffins in the stove, and buttermilk in the churn, and mince pies and cornbread with cracklings, and sour-dough biscuits, and bacon frying in the morning, and coffee, freshly ground, and percolating on the stove's red hot eyes. I can see the house too, rising among its foam of flowers and verdure like a mushroom, its unpainted sideboards black after rain, casket-gray when dry, and rich with the scent of pine and mold and seasoned wood. A gray shape against the black lacework of walnut trees and magnolias, like a picture on a watercolor greeting card, the old wash tubs hanging by the porch, the pump out in the yard, the daffodils round the sides of the house like borders on a woman's dress, and sprays of dogwood to whiten the pine woods beyond. Phlox and well tended sprigs of bunch roses making a riot in color and asters coming all new in the fall, and sprigs of possum holly the year round.

But at night, when Swain comes in from whatever he is doing (he never tells me) and the lights are lit, and the dining room is heaped with good well-spiced dishes, and Swain's touch, his smile, his kisses steal over me, home is forgotten . . . home, and Mama and Papa and Thad.

I had not seen any of them during all this time, and I grieved for them more than I liked to admit to myself ... longed to see them, know how they were getting along, wanted frantically their approval of me. Why, I do not know. I had had their approval once, and had cast it aside like a withered flower.

With no place to go, with never a visitor calling, to while away the hot afternoons talking over tall glasses of iced tea—some of my girl friends at school, or

Claudine, I began to lose interest in life. In other words, I let myself go.

I lost weight, from ennui I know, and my cheekbones protruded, and my lips became drawn, my eyes hollow and lifeless. Even my breasts lost their firm fullness and my complexion turned sallow, like a mulatto's. I even lost interest in my dress, where once I had been fastidious. So long as I tidied up a bit just before Swain's arrival, to look good in front of him, the rest of the time I did not give a toot.

I even lost interest in reading, and once I had loved it. My old time favorite, Flash Gordon lost his glow, and his adventures into Fri'gia, northland of the planet Mongo, with romantic notions about queen Fria failed to stir me, although the art was ever so beautiful. I tried to galvanize an interest in Swain's library. The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, The Red Badge of Courage, A Mocking-bird Sang at Appomattox, Under the Old flag, Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln, Under the Stars and Bars, Letters from Lee's Army, The Memoirs of Colonel John S. Mosby, A Diary of the War, and many more, all books for men, and written of war and strategy, things important only to men like Swain, the military-minded who seek nostalgia in the writings on wars gone by. And I even dwelled for a fruitless time in his definitely private collection: Tawny, Lady Chatterley's Lover, The It Girl, Female Auto-Erotic practices, Unusual Female Sex Practices, Kama Sutra, de Balzac, Sexual Anatomy, Sex Crimes in History, and stacks of female nudes and a host of sketches and calendar art.

In my boredom I counted every brick that went into the foundation of Oakleigh, knew the number of flagstones on the open patio, the total number of panes in the windows, how many different kinds of trees, and how many of each, how many vases, urns, statues, how many chairs, paintings, how much bric-a-brac, and how many mirrors. I had a mental inventory of it all, my mind an endless storehouse of knowledge. I could walk through every room with my eyes shut and not bump into a thing.

And strange, the same as an animal in a cage, yet bound to it. Like the Prisoner of Chillon, after remaining for years in one cell had grown to love it, so I loved Oakleigh, and Swain, loved it because it was his, a part of him, his heritage. And now I was a part of it too, though I longed for the outside, the world from which I had exiled myself, had renounced in favor of Swain.

I tried my luck with various hobbies. I made crude watercolors of Oakleigh, remembering Thad's technique. I painted China. I painted flowers on oddly-shaped stones for paper weights. I even attempted sculpturing with modeling clay Swain brought from Memphis, and he remarked I did quite well at it. And at last I found interest in sketching designs for theatrical costumes, springing from my original flare for acting. I made hundreds of them, in full color, and bound them into albums, drawing on my memory of the exotic attire in the Flash Gordon strip, and from fashion guides Swain included with his many gifts, with which he was more than generous.

He expressed interest, and we began to spend many hours in this manner, sprawled on the library carpet, thumbing through magazines, making rough layouts, studying fabrics. I noticed he began to stay at Oakleigh more, and he made numerous long distance calls to fashionable design shops in Boston and in New York. Letters poured in, and many, many folders concerning fashion school and theatre costume training.

I was in Heaven. Swain was not only a wonderful lover, but he was proving as well to be a wonderful companion. We worked well together, he with the fabrics and I with the over-all designs. He inquired about dress shops in Kosciusko, Carthage, Jackson and in Memphis. The market seemed wide open. The nearest clothes design establishment was in New Orleans, so we had no fear of competition.

Then, the war broke out.

At 6:30 A.M. on the seventh of December Japanese bombers invaded our Pacific naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii.

Spies had given pilots the exact location of hangers, munitions, anti-aircraft guns, and each Japanese plane hurled its load at specific objectives. They struck five more times, and by the end of that day the Japanese had crippled the striking power of our Pacific Fleet. Also lost were a large number of planes and 2,897 soldiers and sailors.

The next day, on the eighth, President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on the Empire of Japan.

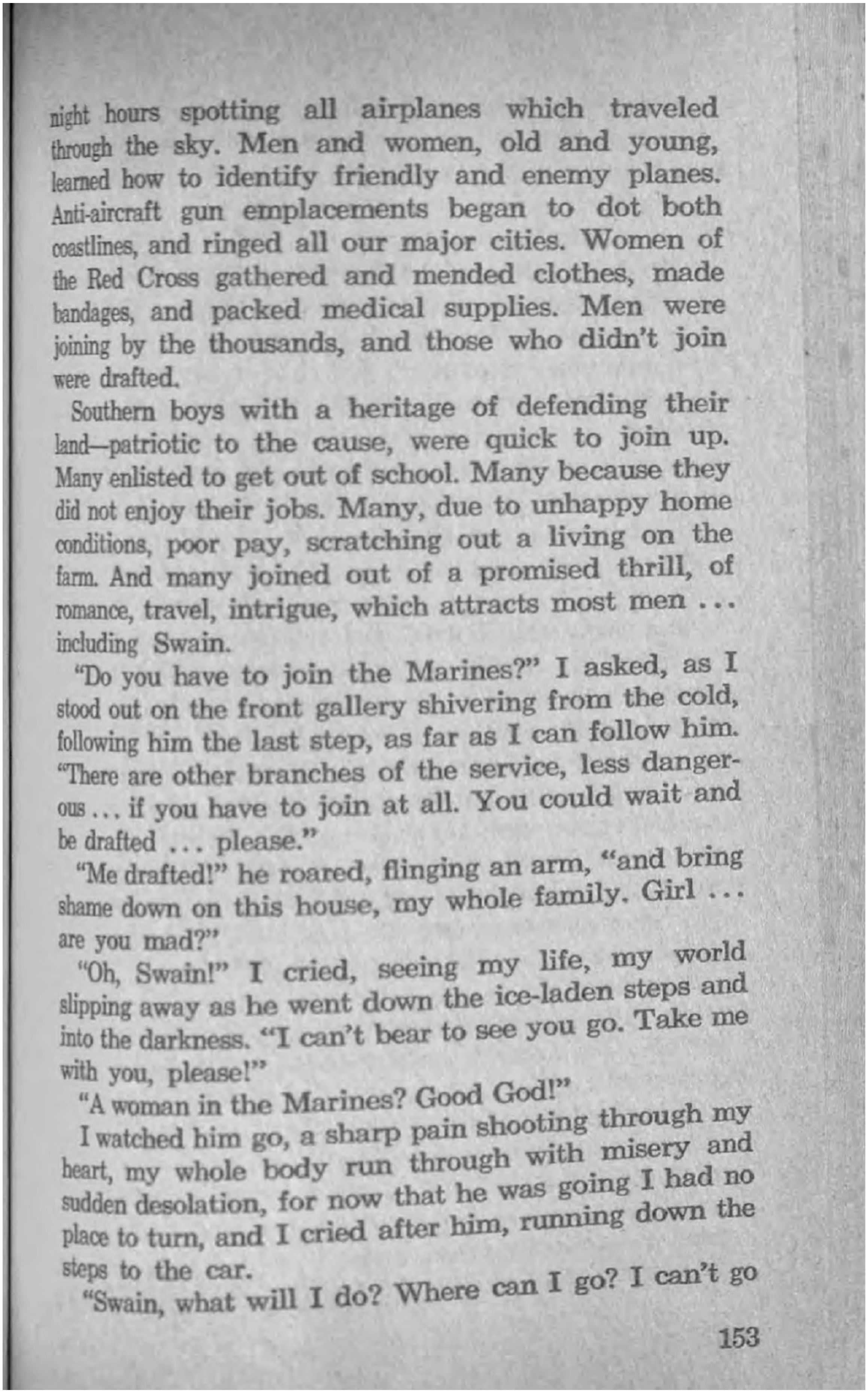
"Well, this is it!" Swain said flatly, as he and I, with Wroten standing in the doorway of the living room, sat and listened to the news coming in by radio.

Terror anew sprang in my heart. I did not have to ask. I knew he would go. I couldn't say a word. I couldn't even cry, for this was a calamity too fearful for tears. Later, when he was gone I knew, then I would cry. Now, I was too paralyzed to move, to think, to feel, only experience the sudden shock of knowing I was losing him.

The cry "Remember Pearl Harbor" swept America, as many countries joined in to help us, while Germany and Italy moved in with Japanese forces with Hitler crying "Roosevelt is insane!"

America immediately galvanized itself into action.

Air interceptor commands were set up along both coast lines to head off possible air attacks. Thousands of volunteer firemen and air-raid wardens were taught how to extinguish incendiary bombs and render first aid. Along the coasts, civilians sat through the long



night hours spotting all airplanes which traveled through the sky. Men and women, old and young, learned how to identify friendly and enemy planes. Anti-aircraft gun emplacements began to dot both coastlines, and ringed all our major cities. Women of the Red Cross gathered and mended clothes, made bandages, and packed medical supplies. Men were joining by the thousands, and those who didn't join were drafted.

Southern boys with a heritage of defending their land—patriotic to the cause, were quick to join up. Many enlisted to get out of school. Many because they did not enjoy their jobs. Many, due to unhappy home conditions, poor pay, scratching out a living on the farm. And many joined out of a promised thrill, of romance, travel, intrigue, which attracts most men ... including Swain.

"Do you have to join the Marines?" I asked, as I stood out on the front gallery shivering from the cold, following him the last step, as far as I can follow him. "There are other branches of the service, less dangerous ... if you have to join at all. You could wait and be drafted ... please."

"Me drafted!" he roared, flinging an arm, "and bring shame down on this house, my whole family. Girl ... are you mad?"

"Oh, Swain!" I cried, seeing my life, my world slipping away as he went down the ice-laden steps and into the darkness. "I can't bear to see you go. Take me with you, please!"

"A woman in the Marines? Good God!"

I watched him go, a sharp pain shooting through my heart, my whole body run through with misery and sudden desolation, for now that he was going I had no place to turn, and I cried after him, running down the steps to the car.

"Swain, what will I do? Where can I go? I can't go back home to Mama and Papa. I just can't."

"Stay here, at Oakleigh," he cried hoarsely, swinging the car in the drive. "It's your home too. Wait for me."

He stops the car and, thrusts out both hands, pulls me into his arms. "Promise you'll stay?" he whispers, kissing me again and again, my brow, my lips, my eyes, my tears. "Promise, baby, promise!"

"I promise," I answer, the pain in my heart all but bursting my sides. I would have promised him the world.

I stand in the cold darkness and watch the car go down the hill, stand until the red light in the rear blinks out among the trees in the distance, then glimpse it again as it turns west on the main road and . . . terrified I think . . . into eternity!

I go into the house like a sleepless sleepwalker, clutching my heart, my brain in turmoil. Suddenly, I want to go home. Without Swain, I need them, need them both, and oddly I think of Thad. Thad! I need him too! But, my heart cries: You can't go back, ever!

I sat down by the fire, pondered my future without Swain. There isn't much to go on, to live for. With Swain gone, maybe to his death, with half the world at war, with Mama and Papa against me, and Thad lost, my future looks grim. If I am left alone in this sprawling house, with this old, though dear, servant, I will go mad.

But I think again and again of my promise to Swain. And as I look about me, see these grand rooms, sense the years Oakleigh has withstood such devastating odds, think of its bulwark against the elements, consider the people who were born beneath its roof, who had lived and died here . . . coupled with my love for Swain, I see something to work for, something on which to build a future.

I would keep Oakleigh intact. The lawn, the flowers, the grounds, the house itself; all would survive under my watchful eyes; would remain preserved by my hands.

I think now, too of Mama and Papa. Perhaps in time, knowing that Swain is gone, they may compromise and visit, get to know the place, and in turn see Swain in a different light; see me in a proper perspective.

I would work hard in the future, do everything for Swain, keeping my love for him alive by toiling around the objects so dear to him, and loving him all the more through his absence. I would regain my self-respect living in this grand old house, inviting callers, making friends once again with the neighbors, call back my old school friends, give parties, make of this house a pleasant refuge for all those people who had dared to describe me deprecatingly. I knew I had done wrong, knew what others thought of me, though I had not truly cared at the time. Now, with Swain gone, I suddenly cared a great deal. He was no longer here to defend me with his love, to intoxicate my mind, take out of it every thought but the thought of him. When I was with Swain—in his arms, submerged in his carnal love, I needed no one. Now, without him, I would need them desperately, need them to fill my loneliness, the long days and months, and perhaps years, without him.

Most of all, I wanted to gain back Mama's love. I wanted to go back with her to those wonderful times before I met Swain, to start from there and live up to the present time, to fill in that gap I had so terribly neglected with her. I longed to make up to her for all the misery and heartache I had caused her. I wanted life to be a life with no one else in it but her and me. I wanted us to romp together, wanted her to read to me at night, wanted us to roam through the woods looking for May balls, wanted us to go blackberry picking down along the terrace rows, to plan flower beds way ahead of time, to speculate over what material would make a certain dress, what hair ribbon to choose, what shoes and purse would go with this or that, or what colors to work into an embroidered dresser scarf, or what we would wear to church, and what we would cook for supper, or what we would have in case the preacher came home with us from church for Sunday dinner. Yes, that was my great dream now, to heal the old wounds, to patch up the damage, to make her love me and think well of me once again.

But I no sooner received my first letter from Swain, telling me what a hectic time he was having at the Marine training base in San Diego, California, and once trained, so many were being shipped immediately overseas, when I lost her too.

I was awakened early one morning just after dawn by an old negro woman tapping at the back porch. It was Ella, who used to help Mama during the summer months with picking and canning. She was crying, the tears streaming down her grief-stricken black face, and her gnarled old hands fumbling with her apron.

“Miss Tala, yo mus’ come,” she cried, sniffing with tears, “You jus got to! Yo po Ma—Missus Hazel … her dyin’.”

“What?” I cried, my heart leaping through my bosom. “She can’t be! Mama just can’t be!”

“But she is,” old Ella insisted, wringing her hands,” yo’ better comes quick . . . her begs fo’ yo’.”

At those heavenly few words, that she wanted me at last, jubilation went through me like electrical flame. Frantically I looked about me, crazy to reach her at last, to gain back our loss, to unite us before it was too late. I could not go on Dusty. He was much too slow, and I needed speed! Speed!

I asked Ella how she had gotten here.

“My man, he brought me,” she replied, her swollen face nodding in direction. "He round in front, in his car."

Sitting between Ella and her man, old Elmo, his dilapidated truck jogging at a snail's pace, with my every breath imagining it was Mama's last, it was the longest journey I ever made.

Papa was waiting in the hall when I arrived, his face white, drawn, painful to look upon, and I fell into his arms.

"Our baby," he whispered, his voice craggy, like a feeble old man's, when he wasn't old at all.

"Mama! Where's Mama?" I gasped, thinking only of her, and what I would do if she died. He could not answer, just pointed to her room. I rushed down the hall, my hair streaming behind, past the living room door where faces, many faces peered curiously at me. Mama's kin, her beloved sisters and their children and their children.

At the door to her room I paused before I entered. I prayed:

"Oh, God! Please don't let her die!"

I slowly opened the door, dreading what I might find. The shades were drawn, throwing a yellow light over the room, like the yellow light that day at Oakleigh when I asked Swain to marry me and he had refused. The light fell on the bed, her pale face . . . so deathly pale, on her hair, its coils unpinned, flowing over the pillow in dark waves. She was dying! Dying to leave me in this dark, desolate world!

"Mama! Oh, Mama." I cried, a little girl again, and not a woman grown, a sharp pain clutching at every fiber of my being as I thought, even in that one moment, of all the hateful things I had done to her.

I sank beside her bed, my eyes glued to hers, and she looked at me with a long desperate look.

"Tala, my baby," she cried feebly.

For the first time I notice that Aunt Pauline is in the room too, a dark blob against the yellow light.

"Well, so the sheep's returned to the fold," she said, bending near me.

"Get out of this room! Leave us alone!" I shout at her, disrespectfully, at last finding my tongue to tell her off.

"Haven't you hurt her enough?" she asked, but left the room quickly, without awaiting my answer.

"Mama, are you alright?" I whimper, stroking her brow. "I come, as quick as I knew."

"Tala!" she gasped faintly, so faint I could hardly hear her. Her hungry eyes sought mine, dark pools of light, fighting for life. That was all she said, but as I spread the sheet and comforter up around her, she caught my hand and held it, as if trying to pull herself back into my world . . . our world . . . hers and mine.

Oh, Mama!

Oh, my poor mother! I pray to God that I can meet you on that other slope of life, and atone to you for some of my recklessness . . . !

We buried her under the pines on the front lawn, as she had often asked . . . the unfenced wilds, she called it . . . even though Papa had told her that people would consider us heathens if we were not buried in Christian ground. Buried her in the dead of winter, the season she most hated, and not, as she would have liked, when the lilacs kiss the Jerusalem Thorn.

When the mourners were leaving, and the horde of Mama's sisters, kissing and patting, departed from the grave site to get into their cars and wagons and farm trucks, and with Papa's huge blacksmith arm around me, holding me firmly, my whole body numbed, we made our way slowly up the hill.

And there stands Thad, waiting.

A lump climbs to my throat at the unexpected sight of him, and I all but smile, so welcome is the calm presence of him there in a dark suit, his overcoat over one arm, his hat in his hand. Then, I drop my eyes, as guilt flooded over me.

He takes my hand in his and his eyes are kind.

"I'm sorry about your mother, Mrs. Rose," he says, his low voice gentle, considerate. "I was very fond of her."

I nod. I know he is telling the truth.

"We welcome your sympathy," Papa replies, speaking for us both. He pats Thad on the shoulder. He turns then to me. "You two kids talk. I should be at the house to say good-bye to our friends, Hazel's and mine ..."

I watched Papa as he went alone through the cut in the hedge, past Mama's dead geraniums, the yellow-striped cane, dead now from killing freezes and heavy frosts, the roses tied up with croka-sacks by her own hands to keep out the cold, until he went up the steps, pausing to speak to a number of mourners on the front porch, then on into the house.

Thad and I remain for a tense, unpredictable moment in silence, neither speaking, our eyes glued to the gravesite under the pines. A freezing wind swayed the branches, making them sigh mournfully, and sprinkles of raindrops, from the downpour of rain this morning, shook down to the brown needle carpet. They fall on the wreaths and flowers, which quiver in the wind, making them look all the sadder, the more desolate in their fate. The wind also plays with my funeral veil which hangs from my black, wide-brimmed hat, and I see Thad's profile darkly, notice how pale, how cold is his face, his lips almost blue, and note their contrast with his blond hair and dark clothes. He seems all the more handsome to me; more mature now—not the smiling boy I had met at Doty Springs Church ... a thousand years ago!

"She was a wonderful woman, your mother," he said at last, breaking our void of silence.

"She was that . . . and more," I returned, a shadow going over my heart at the thought of her, lying there in the wet cold, and I wondered how I would ever make it through the long lonely night knowing she is out here in a deep, dark hole in the ground, with the rain and cold riding all above her . . . Mama . . . who loved sunlight, warmth, flowers, growing things. "Oh, Thad," I blurted, forgetting my reserve. "How can I endure it? How can I go on without her? No one knew her better than I . . . not even Papa. I know what is gone, what is really gone with her. The wonderful things about life . . . things that will never come back."

"I knew her," he declares, his voice low, calm, denying question.

I look through my dark veil to see his blue eyes shining through into mine. "Did you really, Thad?"

"Yes." He studied for a moment. "I knew that she was far more intelligent than most people in these parts. She had a keen insight into things; she had a kinship with nature and people few folks have. She knew far, far more than she let on."

I lowered my eyes; could not look at him.

"What things?" I asked, shivering, but not from the cold.

"You, for one, Tala." He broke off, then swallowed hard. "It's been a long time hasn't it?" He looked away, beyond the grave.

"Too long, Thad," I agreed, not daring to look back, over the hurt places, the gnawing agony of my hurting others.

"Tala." He gulped; tried to straighten his blond hair that was being tangled by the icy wind.

"Put on your hat," I said, stalling for time. "No sense in you standing in the cold, bareheaded just to show me respect. I *know* you are a gentleman . . . have always known."

"Thanks." He replaced the hat, adjusting the brim so that it comes down over one eye, smartly. "Tala," he began again.

I put a hand on his arm, as if in caution.

"Thad . . . I don't feel like discussing . . ." I glanced toward Mama's grave. The wind had scattered some of the flowers over the pine needle carpet, and they were being driven away . . . free . . . as I suddenly longed to be free.

His brow became a map of tiny wrinkles.

"I wasn't going to bring that up," he assured me, and his eyes are steady on mine. "But I've got to tell you this, now. Will you listen, will you let me tell you now, while we are with her?"

"Yes," I said, painfully, and there is a wild ache in my heart.

"I won't be here much longer to see you," he began, clutching at his coat lapels as a gush of icy wind raked over the hill. "I'm going into the Air Corps. Just here until my papers comes through. So I want to ask you now, before I leave . . . will you marry me?"

I am paralyzed for an instant.

"After all you heard about Swain and me?" I asked, in wonder.

He grits his teeth.

"I've heard lies!"

"Oh, Thad," I gasp, gazing into his blinking eyes. "Don't be so gullible! Why pretend any longer? I've hurt you one time. Don't give me a chance to hurt you again. Over Mama's grave, I swear it. I'd go back to Swain, even if I married you. I'm just what she said I was." I feel the hot tears welling over, streaming down my face, dripping off my chin.

"You're *not* that," he says, his expression troubled, puzzling.

I give him a startled look.

"How did you know what she said?"

"She told me," he answers. "But that didn't keep *her* from loving you . . . or me from loving you."

"Mama hated me," I said, morosely, dabbing at my eyes with a handkerchief, living again those many aweful months with her hate.

He took me by the shoulders and turned me to him. A cold wind goes between us, like an ill-omen.

"That's nonsense. She was disappointed, naturally, as I was. But one wrong doesn't break a person's life, the same as one right can't make it. Your mother asked me to be patient and to forgive, that she knew you and believed the better side of you would come through. So, I have been patient. And I have forgiven."

"There is no better side to me, Thad," I advise him, seeing myself wallowing with Swain, and hating myself for thinking about such things with Mama hardly cold in the grave. "You are too good for me; always have been; always will be."

"But . . . will you marry me?"

His voice, though velvety, is firm, and so are his eyes on mine.

I look at him for a moment, an impossible moment, wondering how anyone could be so forgiving, then I look at Mama's grave, and with belly-aching shame I long desperately to free myself of all guilt; to confess in front of her, in front of Thad; to burst the wound and let all the venom out, so that my hurt would become eased, so that I could live with myself.

"Thad . . . the first time I went to bed with Swain I was thirteen, and he was in college at Starkville. Thirteen . . . just thirteen. I was a dirty little girl—and I still am."

He shrugs.

"Well, you had to begin sometime."

"And you would still marry me?"

"I'm not particularlly set on a virgin. I want you, Tala, *you*! I love you, and I want to marry you before I leave. I love your heart and your mind, and I can never love any other girl but you. So marry me before I have to leave, then I will come back and get you as soon as I can."

"Thad," I whisper, my breath a grey fog through my veil. "I couldn't stay here a minute with Papa. Everything reminds me of—" I point to the grave. "Of her. Every wilted flower, every stone, every dead sprig of grass. I just couldn't. It hurts too much. I've got to get away, somewhere, anywhere."

His eyes are filled with hope as he stares down at me, his expression like a small boy's looking in a candy store window.

"Then come with me."

I think of Swain, away in the Marines, perhaps soon to go overseas, into war. He may never come back.

"I can't," I murmur, not looking at him.

"Why?"

"I—I promised someone . . ."

"I know you did," he interrupts, his voice bitter, ironic. "Like you promised *me* once . . . remember?"

"Thad!"

He tips his hat politely, then goes up the hill to his car.

* * *

So, with all my things packed into two white overnight bags, I leave the place of my childhood, leave Papa, the house, Mama's grave, where I linger for one last moment, my memories, my hurts, my griefs, and onto that road, those infinite miles that separate life from death, in search of what, I do not know. Perhaps some substitute for love, or life, or even a crude salvation.

* * *

Chapter
Ten

There is a place on Mill street in Jackson, Mississippi called "The Cottonpicker's Cafe." It is operated by a fat Dago woman who uses the foulest language I have ever heard, but who has an enormous sense of humor and one of the world's sweetest hearts. It was she who gave me my first job, after I had made the rounds of all the dress shops looking for work as a designer. Most of the ladies who ran these shops just laughed at me, even the more exclusive ones, the Emporium and Kenningtons, and ending the interview with, "We sell all our wares on the rack, brought in from New York or the West Coast. Our clientele simply does not bother to have clothes specially designed, even evening wear. Since the war, all the good designers and seamstresses are turning out uniforms," and adding, "Miss Rose, have you had any experience in this line?"

"You ever had a job in a cafe before, honey?" the dago woman asks me, as I leaned over the greasy counter as she slammed the cash register shut with a bang.

I told her I hadn't, not any kind of job.

Her black, liquid eyes look at me, as if she found my frankness unnatural, but refreshing.

"Right off the farm, eh, baby!"

I nodded, clinging to my tiny purse with the hundred dollars in it which Papa had given me before I left, adding: "If you need any more, you know where that came from."

"You'll draw them in here like flies to cow shit!" she said, bluntly, snapping her fingers to a coarse, black-headed girl who sat on a stool behind the counter filing her nails.

"Get your ass off that stool and come here, Eva," the Dago woman demanded. "Got you some help. Show her around. Introduce her." She glances at me, laughs superciliously, shrugs her shoulders, and points at the girl Eva. "Did you ever see a bitch with such a name as Eva . . . little Eva! Ha. Ha!"

"Shut your trap, you fat needle-purse!" The girl spat.

"Get a load of her," the dago woman grunts, pointing a fat thumb. "That Dutch witch!"

There is a roar of wild masculine laughter from a group of coarse-looking men who occupied several of the small tables behind us, their eyes on Eva and the Dago woman.

I learn later the Dago's name is Minnie Cassino, and that she is all bluff, putting on indelicate airs in front of her customers so they will think her tough. I learned, too, that little if anything went on without her knowledge of it. She would fire a girl if she looked at her sideways, and most certainly if she could not take a joke, and would keep on another even if she had a police record a mile long and got in a fight with some man every night. She had a peculiar instinct about people. Her girls had to have a certain quality, a certain degree of honesty and integrity, though they might be prostitutes, drunks, and far beneath the social strata in which they worked. For the place—small, rancid with the smell of grease and onions and beer, with one, huge, fly-specked window in front, a squeaking screen door that never stayed closed, its juke-box trying to drown out the hammering and banging of an automobile body shop on one side and a negro shoe shine shop on the other, a hangout for laughing, howling negroes. Minnie catered only to the railroad employees of the Illinois Central depot across the street, filling station attendants, the back-wash of transients, and a few service men coming and going on the trains and looking for a quick, easy place to eat.

In the daytime it was a somewhat orderly group, workers mostly for lunch, a drunk or two, but after dark it became a noisy, hillbilly music-punctured vacuum, with as many men as could pack into the place, drinking, smoking, cursing, until the air was rent with bellows, fogged with smoke. By midnight, when the law forced it to close, it was a beehive of disorderly drunks.

Minnie helped me find a room and bath on South Gallatin street and, though it was ill-kept, with unpainted walls, a ragged linoleum rug on the floors, a draw-string curtain for a bathroom door, a bed with smelly, moulded quilts, I was glad to get to it at night after a hard day's work at the cafe. There, safe from the groping hands of the men, their callous remarks, their forward, frank advances, their drunken breath, the noisy music, the smoke, the sickening smell of food, hot chili and crackers mostly for sobering purposes, and that of draught beer and liquor, I could take a hot bath and think—think of home and Swain and mama there in the darkness—and Thad.

That first night, coiled in a smelly blanket, with the gas heater sizzling, with the car lights, the noise of walkers going by my torn window shade, I lay and cried until I was sick. I was so lonesome for home and

Papa and Swain I felt I wouldn't live 'til morning, but morning came and went, then another and another, until thoughts of home dulled and the ache for Swain moved over in my heart for other aches, other pains.

I knew that I need not have ventured off on my own; knew that I had a home with Papa, that I could stay at Oakleigh as I had promised Swain, looked after the things until he returned . . . if he ever returned; knew I could marry Thad and never have to worry about anything again. But after Mama died, I had to be free. I had to tear myself from all my bonds, all my loves and responsibilities, had to find an entirely new place to lick my wounds, a place where I would never be reminded of her. I had to get away from Oakleigh too, for there my shame lay, and there, in that shame, the death of Mama. I had killed her with my desperation for love. I had killed her by hurting her, just as I had hurt Thad, so I had to get away from *him* too. I could not, I felt, stay at Papa's and see her grave constantly, knowing I had put her there. I could not remain at Oakleigh and yet live with myself, knowing each day that my living there had put Mama where she was. And I could not marry Thad and wrong him again and again as I had wronged him with Swain.

Though my heart ached for home and Oakleigh, for Papa and Mama and Swain and Thad, eating in a purgative of agony its way out of my body . . . I tried to put up a good front, as Minnie Cassino expected of me, smiled at the callous, dirty men who frequented her cafe, made light talk, promised, listened half-heartedly to their vile jokes, and listened to the love stories of others, while my own heart was breaking, while my own tortured and mutilated love fed on vanished dreams, worn thin in the dreaming.

So I had set myself free, had unlocked the chains which bound me, those chains of love and wanting and belonging; chains of life as lived by simple, gentle folks; and I had scattered everything to the wind, like the ashes of someone's body I had loved. I had broken away from the domestic into the fugitive, the tamed into the wild, to cure my wild heart in the world of the wild.

But I grew to hate the concrete world into which I had plunged. I hated the noise, the shifting people coming and going hurriedly on the streets, the constant honk of car horns, of factory whistles, of incoming and outgoing trains, of bells and unpleasant, nerve-shattering music blasting out melancholy tunes, love songs, sick comedy, war tunes, marches, cowboy ballads, news, news, war! war! war! and planes zooming overhead, and drunks shouting hoarsely, through sucking lips: "give me another beer, you slut!" and soldier boys with: "Honey, how bout going with me tonight, get a room at the Edwards?" or "why waste words, baby, a war's on. Let's fuck!"

Yes, I hated the city, the life that goes on in a city, any city, though I was chained to it although carrying the key, and I dreamed of the peace and quiet of the farm, of the tranquil balm of Oakleigh, and the pleasant sound of voices I had heard and loved all my life, of good clean food and white, sun-dried sheets, and soft feather pillows, and flowers . . . flowers . . . flowers!

At the Cottonpicker's Cafe, directly after the lunch hour rush each day, I would hurry down to the florist shop in the lobby of the Edwards Hotel and buy a live rose, in memory of home and Mama, and place it in a vase of water on the counter, and take it home with me at closing time.

Minnie got a kick out of this, and sometimes she would come in with a bouquet of roses she had bought me. Though the other waitresses took this good naturedly, and went around all afternoon sniffing the flowers, it almost caused a riot when one boy, a sheep-headed roughneck who gassed cars at the corner service station, shrugged his bony shoulders over his beer and shouted: "Hey, Minnie, you turning fruit?"

I didn't know what that meant then, as I knew but few of the expressions these city people used, but I did have sense enough to realize it had infuriated Minnie.

She glared, as if someone had stuck her with a hat pin.

"You get your mother-fuckin', son-of-a-bitchin' dirty ass outa that booth, and don't you ever come back! You hear? Don't ever!"

"But, Minnie!" the boy protested, flinging both hands wide in a gesture of appeal, "Don't get your cunt in an uproar! Ah wuz only joking with yuh. Besides, ain't finished my beer."

She tosses him a quarter and a nickel. She cries, flatly, finally: "Shag ass!"

He went.

She sidles up to where I am standing behind the bar, nervously twiddling my fingers.

"Honey, from now on keep your flowers under the counter, out of sight. These rednecks who come in here wouldn't recognize a kindness if it kicked them in the ass."

She thought I had another peculiarity. Every Sunday I went to the First Methodist church on Capitol street, which was only about four blocks from her cafe and her small apartment which lay above. On occasion she would accompany me, and then we both started attending the Catholic church, the religion of her birth, which was at St. Joseph's, far out on Bailey avenue. Afterwards, when it was warm and sunny, we would go sightseeing, through the new and old capitol buildings, the zoo, and sometimes would take a bus to Poindexter park. She shelved her language when in front of me, especially if we were alone together, and I found her to be far more cultured than she pretended to be. She believed in things, in the world, and in people; and the hectic scene at the cafe had not coarsened those beliefs, even though she was the exact opposite on the surface; even though at times she was forced to curse like a man, fight, get into debates with the police, and take no end of abuse from her customers.

"I like it, baby," she said to me one day, after she had just thrown out two quarrelsome drunks . . . a man and a woman . . . and I had asked her why she put up with so much. "Used to wrestle for a living, and I could put up a fight in those days, could crush the floor beams with some of those babies . . . that is, before Johnnie was born." I looked at her, surprised.

"Yes, but keep it under your brassiere, honey, for only a very few people know. They'd kid me into Whitfield nut house if they knew I had a boy."

"But where is he?" I ask curiously.

"He's a soldier now. With MacArthur in the Philippines." Her dark liquid eyes raked the booths, as she sneers at the men occupying them, seedy looking, with sallow complexions, dingy teeth, fingers stained from tobacco, their eyes dull, lacrymose. "Every time I think of my Johnnie overseas then see all these four F-ers dragging in here, these sorry loafers, bums, has-beens, back woods hard-tails, I want to deny them drink. Then I think: Minnie gal, save it all for Johnnie when he comes marching home someday, and I rake in all I can get—for him, baby, for him!"

Afterwards, I noticed the dirty looks she gives the young men out of uniform, who frequent this cafe, and the friendliness she offers a soldier. Too, I have seen her heap up their plates with extra helpings, keep beer on their table, and afterwards tear up their tab.

"Johnnie would like me to be nice to them," she explained one day when I noticed her slip a soldier's tab into her dress pocket. She stopped, stared through the grimy window for a moment, her mind remote, lost. "Maybe some Philippine woman is giving my Johnnie something to eat right now. Maybe he's as hungry as some of these soldiers who come in here. What's a bowl of soup, now and then?"

I chide her.

"A bowl of soup, with a porter house steak, sliced tomatoes . . . when we can't hardly get steak or tomatoes . . . french fries, gravy, bread, tossed salad, cheese, and four mugs of beer."

"O.K., dear, so you can count!" She slides off on her flat soled shoes, her enormous hips swaying like a schoolgirl's.

On rare occasions, Minnie and I would go to a downtown movie. If it was on a Sunday we would catch a bus and ride out to the Joy, which ran only foreign films. These she loved, for they were interlaced with spice. She loved war movies too, even though she would cry through most of them like in Mrs. Miniver.

Though she could be tight with her money in the cafe, nagged us about putting too much food on the plate lunches, unless it was for some soldier (whom she always tried to serve herself), fussed when we made mistakes at the cash register, she always insisted on buying the show tickets when we went, as well as candy and coke and popcorn.

We saw many movies together: Kitty Foyle, Rebecca, The Letter with Bette Davis—my favorite actress—The Grapes of Wrath, The Little Foxes, How Green Was My Valley, and many, many more. There were a host of B-grade movies then, most of them about some branch of the service, and usually about sailors on leave and girls, girls, girls! You would think that all men thought about was sex, which, I suppose they did.

One day during lunch hour a young boy about my age (I was nineteen then) came in and immediately caught my eye. He was nicely built, about the size and weight of Swain, had Indian hair, straight and black, and sober, honest eyes that seemed to laugh when he looked at you. And he looked at me often while he sipped a mug of draft beer and waited out his steak and spuds.

Though I had kept clear of men since my wild, crazy journey to Jackson, taking a solemn vow never to go with anyone but Swain, to remain his and his only, this boy attracted me, and brought home to me my acute loneliness; in fact, he proved to me just how lonely I really was. Too, he reminded me of Swain a little, with his devil-may-care attitude, mingled with that little boy which is somewhere in every man . . . and appeals to every woman from six to sixty.

Pretending to clean up his table, I asked him his name.

"It's Gil Rankin," he answers, flashing a big smile, displaying two neat rows of pearly white teeth. "What's yours?"

I tell him, shy as a school girl.

"That's a strange name, Attala Rose. Sounds like some kind of perfume, or bath powder."

"Thanks," I say, flattered. Most of the men who came into this cafe never flattered. They just reached out and took. Too, unlike the others, he was freshly scrubbed, his jeans clean though faded from wear, his black boots with a mirror shine. "It's the name of an Indian princess," I elaborated.

He then asked the proverbial question.

"What is a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"That's my question," I turned tables, giving him my best smile. "Was that you who turned in on a motorcycle?" He nodded. "I roam round quite a bit. Never roost in one place for long. I was born free, so I am going to stay free. Chains would break my spirit."

He is an echo of myself, especially since Mama died.

"What do you mean by born free?"

He shrugs his muscular shoulders. "Oh, when I was a kid I had the run of the place. Daddy had a big farm.

He never tried to cage me, or put a harness on me. Said a boy wasn't a boy unless he was turned loose. "So," and he laughs, "I guess that's what I mean by being born free . . . like an animal, I guess, a lion or something." He looks at me with a serious expression. "Does that make sense?"

"I think it does," I answered, my thoughts wandering. I see the farm, Papa and Mama, the hills, the woods, and me roaming in and out of the shade astride Cisco. I look at this boy, his hungry, wild eyes, and I feel strangely that we are one and the same.

Minnie sets his steak on the table with a clatter, and gives him a reproachful eye.

"Why ain't you in uniform?" she blurts out, her black eyes two huge pools of pain. "A draft dodger?"

He takes the accusation in good natured stride.

"I'm a friend of the President." He digs into his sizzling steak, his lower lip twisted down.

"You wipe his ass in other words," Minnie smirks, her eyes fireballs now in the dimly lit alcove.

I blush, my own eyes quickly diverting from his frantic gaze.

"That's about the size of it," he gives answer, thrusting a hunk of meat into his mouth, and cutting her with mocking eyes. They stare each other down, until, as with most men, he relents. He lays his knife and fork on the table, wipes his lips with a paper napkin, and gives a faint hint of a smile. "What's a matter, Helen of Troy, am I in the wrong place? Is this the serviceman's club?"

"It ain't the 4-F convention!"

"I didn't think it was the temple of Athena!"

Minnie stalks back to the kitchen, her lips stuck out an inch and motions for me.

"Don't waste your time with draft dodgers, honey," she advises, her plump arms akimbo. "Get yourself a nice soldier boy, like my Johnnie."

"I didn't mean any harm," I cry, giving the boy a glance out of one corner of my eyes. "I thought him nice."

"I noticed that!" she snaps, then gives a hurt smile. "You're too good for these punks, Tala. Keep your skirts clean. Don't see the likes of him."

But I did see Gil in the immediate future, and often. Though Minnie never softened nor altered her opinion of him, she permitted him to come into the cafe, and managed to stay back in the kitchen supervising the menu, or just keeping away, each time until he left. Then he began waiting until I got off at twelve each night and rode me home on his shiny Indian Chief motorcycle. Minnie hated him for that, though she said nothing. Her look was enough.

On Sundays, instead of going to movies and sightseeing tours with Minnie, I rode with Gil. We would go out to Livingston Zoo, feed the monkeys, watch the polar bears swimming in the ice-filled tanks; went to sports car races and to Milsaps College Observatory to gaze at the moon through the huge telescope. Sometimes, through the crisp, wintry countryside, we would just ride, saying nothing for hours, my arms around his waist, my long hair blowing in the icy wind as we took wooded roads, any road which promised solitude, quiet, retreat from the clatter of city life.

During those gay times, with Gil out in the freedom of the open, amidst the old driven leaves, sitting on mossy banks overlooking quiet lakes, motoring through dappled lanes, I felt something with Gil I felt with both Swain and Thad. My loneliness fled, my old tormenting sensations of guilt receded, and I began to feel like a person again. Though thoughts of Swain ached in my heart and though I saw Mama's face in my waking and sleeping hours, I somehow felt clean.

Then, alone with Gil on these cold wintry Sundays, with the sky white, like a freshly washed soul, the leaves gold and scarlet around us, I felt reborn, felt as if the hand of God had slowly passed over me, cleansing my life of its old wounds, its never-healing scars.

I was like Danae, appearing as pure as a golden shower. Our oneness restored something of faith within myself, and just being near him . . . his physical presence, his quiet manner, his staring absently into the distance, as I had a habit of doing, a common habit with all lonely people, people who mistrust the world . . . made life tolerable.

Sometimes on our countryside jaunts we sang together. There were a vast number of songs being composed about the war, and they were being constantly played on juke boxes and radios and record players. Songs such as: Johnny Doughboy, This Is the Army Mr. Jones, There's Star Spangled Banner Waving, Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition, and When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World. We sang with bursting lungs, our voices echoing through the hills and naked trees, sang whether we carried the tune or not, or if we knew all the words. Sometimes he would whistle, and I would follow in my humming.

One Sunday we rode to Cedar Lawn cemetery and roamed among the graves, and sang softly together: The Old Rugged Cross, the song that was sung at Mama's funeral. We read names on the tombstones and later sat under a tree and shared a candy bar.

Gil never tried to kiss me, touch me, and I was thankful for that. I liked our relationship as it was, without emotional ties, and he seemed to like it best this way, too. He called me his buddy, and we talked on many subjects and were never embarrassed.

It was raining one night when he came to pick me up at the Cottonpicker's Cafe, and when we got to my place we were both drenched to the skin. He rolled his motorcycle onto the front porch and we stood there shivering, hoping the rain would slack up so he could go to his place, a room at the Y.M.C.A.

"Can I stay with you, Tala?" he asked, his teeth chattering from the chilled wind.

"I don't know," I answer, my sense of self-protection coming between my emotions and my logic. Too, I saw Swain's dark reckless face before me, thought of our love, my vow, and I add thoughtfully: "The landlady is peculiar. She may not like it."

"I'm not going to try anything," he assures me. I see his wet face reflecting the street light, his hair plastered down over his brow, see his eyes hauntingly on mine. He stands, clutching his jacket at his neck, shivering, and he begins to sneeze.

I let him stay. I lit the heaters and he sat and dried out while I read a letter from Papa. Then, taking off his shirt and his boots, he lay down on the bed in his socks and jeans, and he slept that way through the night, never moving from his half of the bed, never embraced me, nor even touched me.

He kept his word, as I kept my vow to Swain, and he stayed often at my place, in the very same manner, and I began to get used to him lying in the bed beside me, his arms behind his head, one foot cocked up and resting on the other thigh.

About once a week I received a letter from Swain, surprisingly. His letters were addressed to Oakleigh, but forwarded on to me through Papa. Swain was at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California, attending scout and sniper school. He loved it, he wrote. Proudly he said he was in the Twenty First Marine Regiment, the Third Marine Division, under Lt. Col. Max D. Smith. He spoke highly of the officers in charge, and his company commander. He always spoke of missing me, but never when I could expect him home on furlough.

Each letter, which I folded and tied in a neat little package with ribbon, reassured me of our love for one another, and strengthened my vow to remain loyal to him, and now more than ever, now that he was gone from me, perhaps forever!

With the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese forces had infiltrated the far reaches of the Pacific, taking Guam, Wake, and Midway, on to Sarawak in Borneo, then the port of Tarakan. They landed in the Solomon Islands and in Papua—Australias front door. Then, on to the oil fields of Burma.

They were even in the Aleutians, creating a fog-covered stepping stone on their searoad from Alaska to Tokyo. They had even shelled Santa Barbara, California from off-shore submarines!

Thousands of marines were being shipped into the vast Pacific waters, to the British Solomon Islands, to New Zealand, on into actual combat to take back the many island strongholds now occupied by the Japanese. I feared greatly for Swain, and felt that my obligation was at Oakleigh, keeping the place in order for his return, if he ever returned, but I could not, would not, just yet, live in that lonely old house without him; grow old there before my time, sweating out a war which had no promise of ending. I had to be free.

I had to find salvation in another existence, far remote from the one in which I had grown into the womanhood. I had to run away in order to find. And when Gil told me one night that he wanted to motorcycle into Florida, I was ready to go.

"Too many soldiers here," he complained. "It's like being in the army myself. You can't get nothing done for yourself. They have preference in everything!"

What he said was true. They did have preference. The streets were swarming with them, examples of every uniform representing the United States, and a number of foreign ones. The municipal air base had been converted into a training area for Dutch pilots, and there was a section set up near by for the training of Japanese fliers. Trains coming into the depot were crammed with them. So was every bus, street car, and automobile. They stood in line at movie houses, at cafes, and at amusement centers. The soldiers attracted every prostitute in the land around, and they poured into Jackson by the busload, filling the streets, the cafes, the dancehalls, the bars and lounges.

Minnie hit the ceiling when I gave my notice, but to no avail. Like Gil, I wanted sunshine, open places, air … freedom.

So, with my suitcase and my roll of Flash Gordon funnies strapped to his motorcycle, we said good-bye to Minnie, who stood in the door way of the cafe fighting back tears.

"Don't forget to buy a rose every day," she instructed, her fat hand waving in a gesture of farewell. "And—and, honey. If you ever need anything, let me know … and you will, going off, hell bent to leather, with that shitass!"

"Good-bye, Minnie!" Gil cries, smiling gleefully as he backs the motorcycle up on the sidewalk for me to get on.

"Ah fungoo!" Minnie shouts, giving him the finger.

I had bought a new pair of yellow leotards, black boots and a jacket and, when I straddled the buddy seat, my gloved hands going around Gil's waist, and we started off, my long hair blowing, several soldiers coming from the depot, with sooty duffle bags, gave me the wolf whistle.

"To the wide open spaces," Gil shouts back at me, as he turns left on Mill street and onto Capitol, the main drag.

"Yes, the wide open spaces," I answer, though I feel sad, abandoned, as I go further from Oakleigh … from Swain.

Chapter Eleven

Gil and I checked into the Shelby Hotel, on Collins Avenue in the lower section of Miami Beach—the poorer section. On the East side of Collins avenue, facing the ocean, lies the ritzy sections, with uniformed doormen and statues of the Winged Victory, while only fifty feet or more away are the smaller, cheaper hotels.

We did not notice the lack of grandeur in the Hotel Shelby, its age carried like that of a beautiful woman grown old, for we had free use of the private beach and pool across the street.

Loomis Park was free, a well kept beach running from 6th street to 14th, an almost continuous stretch of clean, white sand, spotted with swaying palms, and bordered by lovely, velvet green trees and lawn. This beach is not marred by the grotesque skyline of the uptown hotels and, because of its enormous length, is never crowded, in or out of season.

The weather is perfect, and from the Park you can look west to Flamingo Park, on across to Biscayne Bay, and north to Surfside park, and across the North Bay Causeway to Treasure Island. Too, there is Indian

Creek, with its picturesque Venetian foot bridges, and its luxurious hotels: Sunset Hotel, Churchill Hotel, Indian Queen Hotel, and the Greenbrier, the Stephen Foster, and others.

The clean blue sky rides above it all, the hot sun picking out the giant seaside hostelries whose splendors rival the palaces of an Assyrian king. There are literally thousands of gleaming cars, resplendent women, cabana-dotted beaches, and spectacular, spotlighted palm trees, a land for miles on end transformed into a gigantic playground.

It is hard for me to believe that in just a few fast paced days I had jumped from a cold bitter climate into this movie-set paradise. It seemed that all around were millionaires, except Gil and I, with men in their dark topcoats, women in furs, their gowns sweeping the pavement, going to and from hotels and dining areas that resembled the gambling casinos at Monte Carlo. Guests were being waited on, hand and foot, by young men in bright uniforms with gold epaulets, by waitresses in such scant attire they barely covered their nakedness, by huge footmen, and squires, and bellhops, and garage men, along with caddies and tourist guides, and cabs—thousands of cabs.

The entire beach, from Biscayne street to 71st street at Surfside park is like a throbbing, pulsating heart. A beehive of gay activity. Old men and women, obviously retired, sit under bright beach parasols playing cards, reading, drinking. middle aged men and women, with their children, sit in the sand, picnic lunches spread between them. The younger groups, huddled, playing guitars and singing, listening to radios, playing games, with enormous beach balls, tennis, volley ball, ping pong. Girls in rows, like soldiers keeping step, making a wide breach, showing off their bright swim suits, with boys parading behind, laughing, cutting up, making obvious passes. Lifeguards, strutting their sun-bronzed muscles, displaying rigid biceps, lifting girls above their heads, turning cartwheels, performing acrobatic feats. Small children frolicked in swarms, like droves of pigeons. An entourage on motorcycles, their exhaust pipes racketing, caused the old ladies to jump, and cars, convertibles loaded with kids, and college groups, and surfers, their bodies the color of lava, their trunks of Hawaiian prints, moved constantly. On the promenades, the conspicuous set, with loud garish shirts hanging out of their pants, straw hats with feather-edged brims, hats decorated with sea shells, miniature coconuts, pineapples, golf balls—women in exotic slacks, many patterned, sandals, enormous straw flop hats, huge purses of some shiny straw weave, of alligator hide, dark glasses, their hands loaded with food, drink, postcards, cameras, were in eternal motion.

A circus! One glorious circus! With the audience the performers.

The sounds of the surf on the Atlantic ocean, squealing girls, masculine yells, loud music, car horns, motorcycles, children, planes zooming overhead, birds, voices, a whimpering child, an old man's voice selling balloons, the treading of sand, and smells: clean air and salt and hamburger, cotton candy and beer, the smell of clouds before rain, of hot asphalt, shells, of bodies . . . many, many bodies. Half-naked bodies, elbow to elbow, crotch to behind, legs to legs, stomachs to stomachs, groping hands, old reclining hands, rough calloused hands, small dainty hands sticky with candy, shiny shoulders and thighs slick with suntan oils, towels waving like Mama's wash on the line in the hot sun, flowered bathing caps, robes, skin tight pants, bouncing brassieres, fat roly poly bellies, smooth bellies, hard muscular bellies, hairy bellies, grotesque bellies, bellies like heaps of rolled dough, bellies exposing scars, long blue lines, bellies showing deep navels, mosquito bites, traces of ringworm . . . and feet! Long, chubby, vein-streaked, swollen, puffed, painted toe nails, all an orgy of sun worshippers.

Then, along the borderline of the flesh beds lay loners, stretched on their backs in the shade of private parasols, radios beside them, seeing, hearing nothing—a good looking boy who does not want to be bothered, a girl, with her bathing suit pulled down two notches too low, taking it easy, and lone girls and lone men seeking companionship—waiting, flesh bait. Advertising!

I see all this with the eye of my mind, as Gil and I, he in shiny white trunks and I in a suit of canary yellow, lay back in the clean sand and squinted at the glaring water turn to surf in the Atlantic Ocean. I think how shapely his legs look crossed, with the hair on his thighs like glistening gold, his toe nails neatly trimmed, his bare chest smooth, glowing, warm ... think of our motorcycle trip to this blessed paradise, our stays in tiny smelly motels along Highway Ninety, eating hamburgers, cokes, greasy hotdogs, and how he would insist on stopping each day at some florist shop and buying me a yellow rose. My "tear catcher" he always called it, just as he had labeled my Flash Gordon collection as my "paper hero." But he was good to me on the trip down, especially good. He had not tried anything once with me, not even a hug or kiss, and even after reading some of Swain's past letters to him aloud, his only remark had been: "Hope that fellow is good enough for you."

Once, when we had come into our hotel room after a tiring swim, and there was a letter from Swain, which Papa had forwarded to me, I asked him if he wasn't the least bit jealous, and he had answered with: "Tala, he saw you first, so by rights you are his." Then pausing, had whispered longingly: "I know he is the perfect gentleman, or you wouldn't care for him like you do."

I had no understanding of Gil in this, for where I came from, country people living simple country ways, when a man wanted a woman he spoke up. Gil's silence was exasperating!

Not that I wanted him to do anything, or to fall in love with me. I didn't. I loved Swain, to the bottom of my heart, and there was no place in it for anyone else, not Thad, not even Gil, though I liked them both. But I considered it strange that a boy would sleep beside a girl night after night, be with her constantly, but never make a pass. If he had shown signs of affection for other girls, prettier girls, I would have considered his emotions natural. But he acted as if girls didn't exist. A casual flirtation, saying hello, a smile, perhaps a wink, and that was all. He seemed contented to be with me, just as if he were with a buddy of his, or, as if we were both of the same sex. These lines were drawn sharply in Attala county, I remembered, and the accent was obvious. I had gone to school with boys who were regarded as sissies, or like my cousin Joel, a mama's boy, because he had been petted by Aunt Pauline. These timid boys did not care for anyone, so it appeared, and kept to themselves. But Gil was no sissy. He was ruggedly-built, like Swain, had his same reckless air, but there was something about him akin to Thad too, a cleanliness, a warm softness which counterbalanced his swarthy exterior.

One night, after paying a visit to the Driftwood Room, a college bar in the Hotel Nautilus on Collins Avenue, we decide to go to the hotel by way of the Rocking MB, a Greenwich Village coffee house. It lies off Park Avenue, but just beyond, along 22nd street, is an assortment of strip dance halls, each lined with svelte women in heavy make-up, their eyes like cold glass, in tight leotards, posing in front where posters of nude girls twice life size glare down at you when you pass, their bosoms scandalously overblown, their bare midriffs and thighs covered only by a strip of sequined gauze, bringing on goggle-eyed sailors and soldiers who swarmed below them, giving catcalls, whistles, making off-color jokes.

"Do they make you frog-eyed?" I ask Gil casually, as we pass an enormous, gaudy marquee exhibiting two dancers in profile, completely nude, carrying canes and a black, high-top hat.

He shrugs, running a hand through his hair.

"Don't do anything to me."

"Not even a whistle?"

"Listen . . . I'm not one of those sailors," he explains, which is all the more baffling. "That's all they think about . . . sex."

I glanced at him from the corner of my eyes.

"Don't you ever think of sex, Gil?"

He glares at me, shifts between me and the street. He keeps his face in profile to mine, pretends to be reading a liquor ad. "What is this, Tala, twenty questions?"

"I just asked," I answer, noticing that he is bothered by my frankness. His brow is beaded with perspiration. He doesn't know what to do with his hands.

We turn in at the Rocking MB, find a table in the crimson-lit atmosphere. A bottled candle sits in the center of our table, which traces our faces in golden light. The decor is in red and emerald, with a circular bar, and people about our age sit playing checkers and chess. A man is reading poetry to the cadence of bongo drums, and lithe forms pass us in the half-darkness, the light of their cigarettes like tiny animal eyes . . . tiny red eyes . . . stabbing at us from the deep blackness.

"About them naked women," Gil says, breaking our realm of silence. He stretches his hands on the table and looks at them, as if he is about to have his fortune told. He holds them out, palms up. "Like any boy my age, I like sex, hell yeah, I like it, like it a lot." He stops talking, glances at the bar. "I . . . I think I do."

"You have never had sex?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh, God! Tala, don't look at me like that!"

He bows his head, his hands buried in his hair.

"I was just shocked," I reply, and seriously I had always thought he had been around, knew the score with girls.

"Well, don't be!" he jeers. "There's nothing strange about a man not ever having sex, is there?"

"In these days there is," I say, trying to be logical. With the war going on, the world was a hodgepodge of sex, everybody getting his thrills before going off to fight.

He lifts his head and looks at me, a burning look.

"So, I'm strange!"

"I didn't say you were strange." I try to think. "Like the song, you're normal as blueberry pie, but . . . "

"But what?" he interrupts.

"I pictured you knowing all about girls."

"Well . . . hurrah! hurrah! What's so important about knowing everything about girls? Men have been —eh—screwing since caveman days."

A waiter comes over, takes our order, then disappears into the moving shadows. We sit for a moment, both staring absently at the candle, the hot wax as it runs down the sides of the bottle, onto the shiny table.

"Look, Tala, I'm sorry about what I said a moment ago," he all but whispers the words, his troubled eyes still on the candle.

"It's just that I want to live my life like I want to, and let others live theirs like they want to. Sex isn't that important to me."

"Is that why you refuse to join the service . . . because you're afraid what the other soldiers might say about you—and girls?"

"Tala!" He slams one hard fist into the opened palm of his other, and ground his teeth against each other in a quick, self-starting rebellion. "For God's sake, don't bug me about sex!"

I remain quiet. After all, I had Swain to make love to me. The waiter returns with our drinks, and we sit quietly, sip sparingly at our rum and cokes, and listen to the music . . . When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World, which was playing now, and now and then our eyes meet, flicker like the candlelight, then meet again.

"Tala," he murmurs, reaching out a hand to touch mine. "Don't be mad, please!"

"I'm not mad, Gil," I assure him, shaking my head. "I just couldn't help but wonder. You seem so attractive to girls. And when a boy has a girlfriend, sex is usually next."

"Is that the way with you and . . . and this Marine?"

He caught me off guard and, with a covering attempt at straightening my hair (which I still style Spanish fashion), I answer as simply as my surprised emotions will allow me.

"You know nothing like that has ever happened."

"I'm sorry," he apologizes, then swigs down his drink. "I know no boy has ever touched you. That's why you're my girl, Tala. You're pure. Clean."

I gulp. I never dreamed he had ever given me a second thought. I try to smile, for truthfully I am a little flattered. I did like Gil, but as I liked Thad. There was no passion between us. Then I think: if only he knew about Swain and me!

"That comes as a surprise," I say, leading him on. And I chide: "What are you trying to do, coming all the way from Texas to break my poor little country girl's heart?"

His face beams radiantly. Suddenly something within him, some smothered ambition, some secretive will, stirred menacingly. He is so eager he frightens me.

"Tala," he begins, leaning close, so close his breath is warm on my face. "Can I dare hope, even with this Marine loving you? Will you let me care . . . really care?"

I do not know how to answer. I see Swain's face instead of Gil's shining down at me, see the lonely months without him, the years ahead, maybe never to see him again. He may die. He may never come back.

"Gil," I murmur, my thoughts drifting back into the present. "You know I care for Swain . . . that I am waiting for him. I couldn't step out on him, not now, not with him in the Marines, fighting for our country. Don't you know that?"

"Yeah," he whispers, toying with his empty glass, his eyes shifting from me to the darkness of the bar where a group of teenagers are huddled, laughing and talking. "Didn't expect you to, not really. You're a good girl, deserve a good man."

He looks hurt, his world smashed, and I am sorry momentarily that I have awakened this emotion within him. Knew that it should have remained dormant.

"I like you Gil," I try and smooth the hurt. "You know that."

He nods, his lower lip protruding.

"It was just a hunch." He refuses to look at me now. "I never cared for girls much, afraid of them actually, though I don't know why. Every time one gets near me I break out in a cold sweat, and my hands get numb, and I get to feeling funny in the pit of my stomach. That's why . . . that's why I never could bring myself to have sex with a girl, couldn't go through with it. I'd have everything ready, a place to go, a girl and everything, then I'd get clammy all over and cut out." He looks at me now, a look from the bottom of his eyes. "But I don't feel that way with you, Tala. Honest. I feel natural around you, like I do around other boys.

That night in Jackson, when I asked you if I coul stay at your place, I got up nerve, just for that reason you being so natural. so understanding. But in bed I said to myself, you can't touch her. She's too good she's pure. But . . . Tala . . . just lying beside you feeling your warm body near me, has helped me a lot. I could touch you. I could want you sexually. I can g through with it, for I do want you. I love you . . . you must know that."

No, Gil," I say frankly. "I didn't know that. You always seemed so casual, so unmoved where girls are concerned."

He orders another round of drinks. The music is bursting the walls with This Is The Army Mr. Jones, with the clientele joining in with a boisterous chorus, and we have to practically shout.

"Maybe if you would join some branch of the service," I suggest. "Other, more experienced boys will help you, introduce you to girls who—who will," I stammer, "or maybe one of those houses."

"I'd never go to a whorehouse," he answers flatly, looking me straight in the eyes, "if I never had sex. And I'm never going to join any branch of the service."

"Why?" I ask seriously, feeling it his duty, especially if the war had taken Swain, why not everyone else? Though I realize I would miss this handsome boy, who has been the closest person in my life now for almost a year. We had been together day and night, sharing the good with the bad, inseperable, feasting together when the days were good, fasting together when they were lean. We had pooled everything, had gone fifty-fifty. Several times I would have starved had he not gotten out and done odd jobs in order to keep us going. For Papa's hundred had long been spent, and the money I had earned at the Cottonpicker's Cafe had gone on clothes and hard-to-get cosmetics. And it was strange that I had not entertained any feelings for him, just an odd curiosity, until tonight. Now, for the first time, I sense our unity, sense my lostness without him, my destitution should I lose him . . . to war, to some other girl.

"Why don't I join?" he says morosely, fumbling in his tight jeans to pay for the drinks. "The service killed my oldest brother, my only brother, and I'll never forgive them, and I'll never serve my country for that reason. I worshipped him. Danny was a God to me, a marble God I set on a pedestal and admired. When he was gone I lost everything!"

"I'm sorry," I murmur, taking hold of his hand. And I think how strange it is that you can be with someone day and night, yet not know them utterly.

"A stupid obstacle course," he goes on, bitterly, his lips twisting down at one corner. "Made him crawl under barbed wire while they shot fifty calibre machine guns above him. He caught a stray. God! What a stinking war! What a stinking world! I loved him." He squeezes his glass until I think it is going to smash in his hands. He looks up at me, his eyes liquid with tears. "Come, Tala. Let's go to the hotel. I don't feel well."

Since that night, Gil and I have been closer. Something, like an invisible magnet, of understanding, has anchored us. In movie houses he puts his arm around me, holds my hand. He kisses me good night, and we both have become guilty of doing small things we know the other will like, like the daily rose; he buys two now, one for each of us. I drink the kind of beer he likes, and we eat at the Istanbul, for it serves his favorite dish: flat, crisp Syrian bread with melting butter, followed by shish kebab beef filet mignon, with tomatoes, onions, and pepper. He tags along with me on my delirious shopping excursions, from Elizabeth Arden and Saks Fifth Avenue along Lincoln Road to the Silver Dollar Stores on Collins. In turn, I sweat it out with him at the shooting gallery, the Fun-o-rama where you can watch moving picture post cards of naked girls, and he out-does himself to defeat me in archery at North Shore Park.

At night, too, there is a mutual warmth between us, as he lies next to me in bed, his hand—like Swain's—entwined in my hair, and there are those sudden electric moments when we are at sports, ice skating in the artificial rink, when our hands touch, tussling in the high tide off the Atlantic Beach, or just strolling together down 15th street fronting Flamingo Park.

At times, with his light jokes, his childish pranks, his morale when things get tough, the balm of security I feel when in his presence, his masculine protection, I feel there has never been a Swain, nor an Oakleigh, nor Thad, nor Papa or home, that Gil and I have been together all our lives, enjoying the good times, enduring with a casual, unaffected air the bad. He made me feel as if we belonged without really belonging. Like two flowers growing side by side in the sun, inseparable, and that if one is clipped the other quickly dies.

He made me forget war too, though Collins Avenue was swarming with white sailor uniforms like a flock of birds against the pink skyline of hotels, engulfed with Navy Officers and Air Corps cadets from the Homestear Air Force Base and the Naval Base at Key West. Made me forget near-starvation and privation when we had only twenty five dollars in the kitty and no promise of a job in sight.

Gil didn't want me to work, now with our new understanding. I was his girl, he kept insisting, and he dogged the streets looking for something to do. He always returned to the hotel in disappointment, for when he did locate an opening the first question usually asked of him was: "What is your draft board classification?" No one wanted to hire someone eligible for the service. Though they did not object to hiring 4

F-ers (for the beaches were plagued with outcasts of every description and nationality), a person half-blind could see that Gil was physically capable. No one wanted to hire a boy who, at any day, might be called into the service.

We got down to only two dollars between us. Things really began to look desperate for us. We had eaten nothing but popcorn and coke for the past three days, with the exception of doughnuts and coffee that morning ... to keep us alert ... and by nightfall we were near despair. To make the situation worse, to accent our poverty to the maximum, we were surrounded by the wealthiest set of people in the United States: retired millionaires, show people, celebrities of every calibre, movie stars, famous singers and nightclub entertainers, oil tycoons, people who'd lived up north who'd sold their businesses and come here to live out their lives in luxury, wealthy businessmen, usually old or middle aged, here on a fling, and not too wealthy ones here to enjoy their remaining bank rolls.

Their wealth made us feel poorer. Their obvious show of money made us seem shabby by appearance. Though Gil and I both managed, and had always managed to look neat and clean, the lack of clothes forced repetition, and we felt that others noticed us wearing the same old outfits day in and day out, whether they were too hurried, too absorbed in their own personal ostentation to notice or not.

In the cool of that evening we sat down on a bench facing the Atlantic Ocean, our hopes dashed like eggs against stones. I begged him to let me try my hand at a job, waitress, car-hop, anything to tide us over. He flatly refused.

"If I'm not man enough to make us a living I'm not man enough to have you ... so that's final. Something will turn up. It always does." He gives me a wistful smile, which goes over my tired body like warm oil.

And I think how good and decent he is: Thad i disguise.

Sadly, enviously, we silently watch the bathers an promenaders go by, couples, lovers, old men and women, grotesque in their gaudy bathing suits, exhibitionists, their attention drawn momentarily only t others, two little half-naked boys tossing a beach bal the color of tombstone white, a lone girl dragging towel . . . like a deserted bride; two men in identica swim attire, yellow shirts and black shorts with aqu trim, a soldier, alone, self-conscious about his loneliness, feeling displaced, an older man, bald, in a basqu shirt, red as blood. He takes short puffs off his cigarette, glances silver eyes toward us, rakes his gaze ove Gil, then scuffs down to a little curved bridge tha spans Indian Creek.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a minute," Gil say surprisingly, getting up quickly and strolling off afte the old man who turns now, stares once again, the moves beyond a screen of palms.

I could do nothing but obey. His absence makes m instantly think of home, and a deep loneliness wells u within me, and I am on the verge of tears. A sailo saunters by, goes slower when he gets even with me pauses, glares at the darkening ocean, as if listening hearing something out there in the churning waves The evening breeze pulls at his bell bottoms, tighten the white folds against his legs—legs thick with muscl . . . football legs, they call them, I remember. Hi shoulders are broad there against the purple sky, hi black silk neckkerchief blowing behind him, and ther is a wild tuft of hair escaping under his cap whic balances, miraculously, on the back of his head.

He turns, catches me staring at him. His eyes instantly twinkle, burn, ignite with that tell-tale illumination I can recognize in any boy to decide its meaning . . . sex hungry and saved-up lust.

He comes right out with it.

“Care to shack?”

He catches me offguard, and I cannot help but smile at his forwardness, his absurd invitation. This lends him added boldness—as if he needs any of that, and he comes boldly up to me. His grin is as broad as Collins Avenue.

“I'll give you twenty. That's hard-earned pay. And I'm raring to go! A thrill a minute, babe!”

The twenty sounds like a million and, though I have no intention of accommodating this daring sailor, I lead him on, mischievously. Like the prostitutes I had seen in the movies, I take my lipstick from my purse and began to apply it to my lips.

“Where you from?” I ask, lovingly.

“From that hell-hole Key West!”

“Do most of them out there pay as much as you do ... for entertainment?”

“Nah,” he brags, flopping down beside me, his white collar lifting with the wind behind his neck like the stiff lace collars in paintings of Queen Elizabeth. “Cause none of them can't want it as bad as I do. So bad it hurts, babe.” He lays a hand on my knee.

I give him a cold, but tantalizing gaze, gauging my silence intentionally.

“I'm afraid you'll have to keep hurting,” I say softly, tossing my head until my shell earrings dance.

“What!” he gasps. “Thirty then . . . make it thirty-five!”

“You're not hurting, sailor. You're sick!”

His face reflects the shock of my rejection—turns to a fish green.

“But I thought . . .” he fumbles for words.

“I'm waiting for my husband,” I interrupted. “A Navy captain, Swabby.”

He leaps from the bench, his cap instantly in his hands.

"Sorry, lady!"

He is off through the palm trees.

Gil returns, sits down on the bench wearily, his face sad, a little pale, his eyes dull, tiredly dull.

"I got five dollars," he announces, just like that.

"How?"

He refuses to look at me, his elbows resting on his knees, his booted feet gouging into the soft sand.

"I wouldn't tell you for anything in the world."

To get even, I tell him about my proposition. He but laughs, but then his face flushes, becomes a mask of seriousness.

"Tala. Promise me. Don't you ever hustle, ever?"

"I promise."

We decide to go to the Boom Boom Room and forget our troubles. And for another reason. One of the bartenders had half-heartedly offered Gil a job.

We take a dark corner, because of our dress, and order the cheapest drink in the house. And for a moment of giddy frolic, amid the strange trappings, like an African hut, with overhanging Buffalo grass, the chairs made of straw, and jungle objects placed here and there enchantingly like a Tarzan movie set, we banish all care.

We obviously look the part we are: bums in desperate need of a buck, for a man immediately spots us and comes over. He is the rattiest man I have ever seen. His hair is a dark, coarse mop, and there is a stringy beard on the tip end of his too-pointed chin. His eyes have a certain slant, or is it makeup?

He introduces himself as Milton, shakes hands vigorously with Gil, too vigorously for such a thin, weak frame, and eyes me steadily, as if he knows what I look like without my clothes.

He comes right to the point: "I'm photographer for a local beachcombers magazine." He focuses his eyes on Gil. "Would like for your little lady here to do some modeling."

"Nothing doing." Gil says this flatly.

"They'll be harmless pictures," the man continues, grinning with a malicious grin. "No names will have to be recorded, no chances to take with the law ... nothing to worry about."

Gil's eyes become like to fire balls.

"You're talking about naked poses!"

"Certainly," the man mutters, disregarding Gil's stare. "What makes you think she would do such a thing?" Gil asks, pointing a thumb at me. "She's lady of quality."

"That's obvious," the man agrees, his animal eyes shining down on me, my bosom, a direct gaze. "That's why I'd like her to pose. I can get all the other kind I want. But those faces are a dead give away. But not the lady here. She's got a natural, youthful quality, innocence to go with the body."

"Still no sap," Gil insists.

"Pay you a hundred," the man says readily, slapping the table. "And you both need the money ... been watching you several days now."

I take a deep breath. Was our poverty that noticeable? I look at Gil, who is staring at the man as if he wants to kill him.

"You can come along too," the man promises Gil, ignoring his frozen stare. "See for yourself how harmless it is. Just a few poses, standing, kneeling, reclined ... all in the best of taste."

"It's not our line, Mister."

"Then ... what is your line?" the man asks, his beady eyes like a rat after a piece of cheese, piercing the darkness, burning, alive with an individual life of their own, as if they could live independent of his body. "I have other odd jobs in the way of photography."

"You get the hell outa here!" Gil spits, every muscle in his body grown taut.

"Wait, Gil," I say, seeing a fight coming on. "I'll do it."

"You'll what?" He turns on me, as if he wants to strike me too.

"We need the money—like eh, Milton says."

"We don't need it that bad!"

"See . . . your little lady is smart, knows a good thing when she sees it." Then he adds, more sober: "This beach magazine has quite a circulation, New York, Hollywood, puts your looks before the public. Many a movie star got her start this same easy way."

This last impresses me, brings back my old high school ambition to become an actress. The ambition still burned, but had lain inside my thoughts, dormant, since Mama died. Now it came alive again, vividly alive!

Gil refuses to watch, stands outside the studio door until I had gone through a set of ridiculous poses. When I came out, and hand him the one hundred dollars, he gives me a hurt, woebegone look, and I try and cheer him up.

"It wasn't all that bad, no worse than stripping in front of a doctor."

"I hate it!" he blurts out, cramming the bills into his jeans. "The way he goggled you! I still ought to go back and knock hell outa him."

"At least we've got some money."

"Yeah . . . tainted money," he growls. "Makes me feel lower than a snake's belly."

Tainted or not, it was nice to have money once again, and the taste of good warm food and fresh clothes made the incident a little less embarrassing to me, though each time I thought about it I shivered.

That ratty face! Those wobbling eyes! The annoying way he had of sticking out his tongue!

But with a little money ahead, our morale jumped several degrees, and Collins Avenue, the bright shops, the clean, pink stucco hotels took on extra glamour. We spent the daylight hours swimming, sunning (we both had wonderful tans) and the nights sipping a drink in one of the many bars and lounges East of Indian Creek. Sometimes we would motor over to Miami proper, to Coral Gables, up to Hialeah, and over to the little Island of Key Biscayne.

One late afternoon, after a full day in the Atlantic, before going to the hotel I stopped off at one of the little shops to buy an umbrella and raincoat combination, explaining to Gil that I would see him in our room. I had noticed the ensemble several days before, and they were all the rage on the beach, for both were of a translucent plastic which could be worn over a bathing suit, cut to look like a trench coat, and dressy enough to be worn even at night in clubs and places of amusement. I bought a canary yellow, and when I arrived at the hotel room I find Gil reading a letter from Swain.

I thought nothing of the incident, for usually I read all my letters aloud to him, those from Papa, Claudine, Dolly. Swain never wrote letters of love, no passion notes, so I had as usual read them to Gil as well.

"Where is he stationed now?" I ask, as I cross the room, glance at the letter, and into the bathroom.

"Some place called Camp Elliott," he answers morosely, so low I can hardly hear him. "Military Sketching School."

"Wonderful," I call back to him, sticking my head out of the bathroom door. "At least they haven't sent him overseas."

"That would be a catastrophe," he says bluntly, slamming the letter on the night table. He rises slowly from the bed, still in his bathing trunks, his eyes burning on me, and comes striding across the room to where I stand in the bathroom doorway. "You little innocent-acting bitch!"

His eyes have an enraged glare; eyes I have never seen before in any of his many expressions, and at the sight of them, more than his rigid body, his hard drawn fists, I draw back in mock terror.

"What do you mean?" I cry, completely baffled.

"It's all in there—that letter!" he half-screams, pointing to the crumpled piece of paper. "How could you, Tala! How could you pretend such a lie? Such a monstrous lie!" His voice is like a clap of thunder in my ears and, rushing across the room I pick up the letter and began to read.

Hello Princess

What a disappointment when I came home on a thirty day leave and found you gone. Wroten knew nothing, so I went to your Father. What in the hell are you doing in Florida? I left with the impression that you were to stay at Oakleigh and see after things until I got back. Promises! Promises!

I almost went mad, stark raving mad when your Father told me where you were, I wanted you so bad. I wanted you as bad as I wanted you that first night, remember? We had a ball that night, didn't we? If I had had the time, I would have come chasing you, but I had to report back to Camp Elliott for a six weeks training course in military sketching school. Map making, baby. I am sure hot for you, after all these months without a woman, and I'm also hot at you for running off to God knows . . .

I suddenly feel faint. I cannot read the rest. I sink to the bed, my knees like water, my whole body trembling. I stare down at the letter quivering in my shaky fingers, stare numbly, as if it is my death warrant. It is all there on that tiny piece of paper, all the awesome truths, the factual account of what I am, what I have become.

I look up at Gil, see in a teary blur his hard dark body looming above me, notice strangely how the thick wiry hair plays along the heavy muscles of his thighs, and for the first time, really, I see how attractive he is, realize how much I truly need him.

"Oh, Gil!" I stammer, my voice unstable, my chin quivering. "That was a long time ago. A very long time ago."

"But it still happened," he says through clenched teeth. "And all this time you pretend to me you've never been touched."

"I was only thirteen . . . when it started."

"Thirteen! he shouts. Like lightning his fist flares out, strikes me squarely in the face. There is a noise like the sharp crack of a whip. I reel. My head spins. Before I can recover from that first blow, he strikes me again. I see a million stars. I cry out. But like a pile drive hammer his fist pounds at my face, my body.

"You two timing slut—and I loved you. I *loved* you," he growls, and through the dull thud of his blows I hear him, hear him above my own screams, my overwhelming fear, pain.

"Don't, please don't, Gil," I hear my own voice cry out and, somehow, I try to reach the door, but he is on me like an animal, tearing away my clothes, at my hair, slapping me in the mouth, cursing, groaning. The room spins and I am being dragged to the bed, my dress in threads, and flung suddenly upon the mattress. I feel the impact of the fall, a sharp pain along my spine as he leaps on top of me, and we are in a tangle of legs and arms, torn clothing, my loose, flowing hair. He pins me down with one arm, and through a dim focus of tears and blood, I see him rip away his trunks, see his maleness in one instant of terror, the enormous size of his maleness, now grown completely savage, and I all but faint at his intentions.

He enters me without consideration for my own pain, and suddenly his darkly tanned body covers me, and his awesome strength, changed into something superhuman now through his madness, plays out its ferocious role, taking pleasure by giving pain.

He holds me with such vigor, his body covering every inch of my body in a vise-like grip I cannot break, the savagery of his rape counterbalancing my weakness, my helplessness, that our bodies move in equal unison. He taps my deepest recesses now with his gigantic equipment—as a seducer, a stranger, a sudden dark stranger in my arms, taking me, enjoying me, no longer the placid, soft-smiling Gil, but a monster obsessed with lust, avenging some inner pride, taking out his wrath on my body, my incredible pains. And each time he moves, plunging down against me, a sharp pain flashes through my being like electrical currents. He is too much for me, would have been too much had he taken me through love, with my acceptance, but now, with the hate of a senseless savage, his organ driven by the direct ferocity of his sinewy body, it is as if the tissues of my abdomen are being ripped open, torn as he ploughs into me, like a blade slicing the red earth, ruthless, bent on shredding away, gorging a crimson path to its essential, driven glory.

Darkness then covers my world, a darkness that is Gil, that is pain itself. And out of that deep, mournful darkness, when he lies still at last, his heavy breathing pumping the air, I hear his whimper grievously, his slobbering lips on my breasts, my naval: "Forgive me, Tala! Please forgive me! Please God! I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry!"

Chapter Twelve

I awoke with a jolt. The sunlight was streaming in through the one tall window, its light bright on the sheets of the bed, now stained with blood—my own blood. The pillows were stained too, wrinkled untidly, and through puffed eyes I gazed around.

Gil is gone!

There is a dent in one pillow, where he has lain, and the sheet is in a million tiny wrinkles, wilted, soiled, scattered with torn rags from my dress, my slip, my under garments. I am naked, and as I try to lift my head, roll my eyes, monstrous pain shoots through me, and my head reels.

In agony, I pull myself up, slide my legs off the mattress, and manage to get to the bathroom mirror.

My God! I am a mess!

My hair looks like one of the witches in MacBeth. One eye is swollen, purple, puffed. My lip is cut from his hard knuckles. And there are bruises and lacerations along my neck, my shoulders, and down one side of my breast. I dab my face with cold water, wince at the sudden pain, and try vainly to comb my hair.

I searched through my purse, took out a vanity case of pancake make up and applied it to my face, in thicker layers where Gil has bruised and broken the skin. Then I try to put my jumbled, confused thoughts into proper perspective. I can find only a quarter and a nickel in my purse. Gil has taken every cent. His clothes are gone, his little collection of sea shells. I ring the desk clerk and ask him what time is it. He answers three oclock.

Three oclock in the evening.

Suddenly, I realize my predicament. Gil has left me for good! Has left me without money, left me penniless. And my face! How could I ever get a job with a face like this?

I feel pangs of hunger, I am mentally and physically sick, and I haven't even got an aspirin, or any kind of medication. I think of last night, what Gil has done to me, then I think of Swain. Picking up the wrinkled letter, I read it again and again. I sit on the edge of the bed and cry.

"I've wronged you, Swain," I mutter over and over, aloud. I had given myself to another man. No, I think, in an attempt to free myself of some of my guilt. Gil had taken me, had raped me actually. I had not given myself freely to Gil, as I had with Swain. But what the difference? Another man had still made love to me, had taken me sexually, when I had belonged to Swain. I would never belong to anyone but Swain. Yet, there is a hollowness within me and now without Gil, I feel lost, alone, and this makes me doubly afraid. I had relied on him to do all the worrying, to solve our daily problems. Now I am faced with them. Meals, board, clothes . . . where were they going to come from? And my face! My face!

Damn men anyway, I cry from the bottom of my soul. All they ever want is sex. And I thought Gil was different.

Well, he was gone now. He had had his thrill. I look down the length of my naked body, wonder forlornly why men become so desperate for a female, why they will take so many risks, go to such extremes.

I had to do something, go somewhere . . . but what? Where?

I all but panic.

I prayed for a miracle, some miraculous something that would lift me up and in another moment set me down at home.

Home!

I wanted to go home, home to papa, and to mama's grave. In my tortured mind, amidst my feverish pain, I see the hills, the farm, the quiet countryside, the way the evening sun laid out the long shadows of the trees the way the old house sat floating in the foam of Mama's flowers, the lanes crowded with cows and horses, and the kitchen, fragrant with the smell of cooking ham and biscuits, and hot coffee, and cakes thick with icing, sweet potatoes floating in butter, cornbread golden from beaten eggs, and steaming vegetables, and trays of fried chicken, and Mama and Papa's heads bowed under the low of oil lamps. And I think desperately, frantically: think what Swain had said in his letter. What in the hell are you doing in Florida?

As if awakening from some impossible dream, I find myself in stark reality. Hundreds of miles from home, penniless, jobless, my face bruised, swollen, my nerves frayed, my future suddenly a wall of blackness through which I must pass alone. I could not ask Papa for money for he had no phone (few people did in the hills) and it would take days for him to send it through mail. I could not ask Swain, for it was impossible to reach a serviceman by phone, especially one in training, for calls were just not relayed. And Thad. Where was Thad? I had not seen nor heard from him since the day at Mama's funeral and he had said goodbye. One note from Dolly, his cousin, that he had joined the Air Corps, and that was all. And Aunt Pauline . . . I'd die of starvation before I'd ask her for one cent. Joel might help, but I had no idea where he was. Then . . . there is no one!

Then I think of Minnie . . . Minnie Cassino!

She had given me my first job, had treated me like her daughter, and had said: "If you ever need anything, Tala!"

I hurriedly dress in my white embroidry, my new yellow trench coat, my yellow pumps, pack my white overnight bag, tucking my roll of Flash Gordon funnies in neatly below my underwear . . . put on dark glasses, and, tucking my yellow umbrella under my arm, in order to avoid the desk clerk, leave the hotel by way of the service entrance. I make a collect call to the Cottonpicker's Cafe in Jackson. One of the waitresses answers. No, Minnie is not here, but will relay your message. I hurry to the Western Union branch office and wait. An hour passes. Two hours. Then three. Twilight is coming on. Neon lights spring into a technicolor fanfare, and car horns, in the heavy evening traffic, keep up a continuous racket.

A clerk calls me to the desk.

"Are you Miss Attala Rose?"

I beam with anticipation.

"No money, Miss," the clerk informs. "But there is a message."

I take the telegram in trembling fingers.

Outside the Western Union Office, I unfold the paper and read:

Ask your friend Gil Rankin to give you fifty dollars out of the hundred he took out of my cash register the day you and him left stop. Sorry, stop.

Signed
Minnie Cassino
c/o Cottonpicker's Cafe
1007 Mill Street, Jackson, Miss.

My knees buckle. I tremble like a thief. I can see Minnie's face as she sent this. An eye for an eye, Mama would have quoted. Despite my appearance, I decide to look for work. I am famished. I had always been a hearty eater and, besides being hungry, I had to find a place to stay tonight.

I try a number of cafes in downtown Miami. The answer is always the same. "If you would get medical attention first, I'm sure we could use you," or, "honey, shouldn't you recuperate first, then apply," or, "we want our girls to look attractive to the tourist trade. Come back in a week or so."

In a week or so! I would be dead of starvation by then!

With the quarter in my purse I get a doughnut and a cup of coffee. Several sailors pass, give cat calls, then they see my face. A Marine, resplendent in his dress uniform, sits down next to me, strikes up a conversation, then dismisses himself politely, instinctively. Two more sailors, one look, a shy aboutface. I do not blame them. Who would want a girl with a black and blue face? I curse Gil under my breath for putting me into this condition.

I go back to the beach. Everytime I hear a motorcycle I quickly look up, hoping to see Gil. I hated him, yet I needed him. He would have some money. I knew no one. Tourists were a cold lot. You spoke to them.

You carried on casual, worldly conversations with them, then they vanished from the scene. There are no lasting friendships on Miami beach. At home, if you knew a person, then you knew them all your life. Not here. These people are like a flock of birds. Fun seekers. Aloof, independent in the security of their wealth. What they had they kept, spending lavishly on their own set of friends, but thrifty, misers to needy strangers. But, I wouldn't beg. I wouldn't sell my body for sex purposes either. Though I had allowed Swain to have me, it was for love not money, not what I could get out of him in return. Gil ... that was something else. The fickle hand of fate, you might say. Though I was much to blame. I could have, should have remained at Oakleigh, where my heart lay, where the temple of my body sacrificed itself for Swain's love, the dark godliness of him. And, thinking of him now, forlornly desperate to see him, to have him take me out of my fears, I stand in front of a spotlighted dress shop display window and toy with the ruby bracelet he had given me, and which I had always worn, not taking it off once since that night in the car when he had fastened it on my wrist. I could pawn it for quite a sum, I knew. But I could not. I would not. I'd starve first. I notice the diamond engagement ring on my finger Thad had given me. It meant nothing. Yet, I could not sell it. Mama had liked Thad. So had I. The ring was like a part of home. Deeply set with memory, like a lock of hair, a poem, a leaflet of poetry. I would not part with these tiny momentos of home. They were my one link, my last link to my past.

With nothing else to do, no plan for tomorrow, no hope for tonight, I have one desperate plan left—go to Milton the photographer. With frantic haste, for I do not want time to think, to alter my plan, I go to his place. His eyes bulge like light bulbs when he sees me, alone, without Gil. He jumps and scurrys about the untidy room getting the equipment set up for more nude pictures. I strip and, under his direction, his beady gaze, I go through the most ridiculous series of poses I had ever heard of or dared to dream. But thankfully, because of my disfigured face, he allows me to keep my long hair down one profile so that the bruises will not show up in the pictures. Besides . . . what's in a face? Especially in pictures of this sort. He wants my body and nothing else, suggestive views for some cheap publication. I needed the money so badly I refused to consult my conscience. A brief interlude of debauchery, of corruption then it would all be over. Tomorrow . . . in the light another day . . . I would put the guilt out of my mind forever, as I had put aside and forgotten bad dreams. A nightmare that will end, never to reoccur.

When the posing session is at last over, and I stand up to dress, he comes over and presses my body against the wall, his long, pallor fingers, like a skeleton's, fondling my breasts.

"I'll give you a hundred and fifty, if you will!" he pants, his eyes sickly white, silvery, like a fish, his trembling lips parted, his tongue loose, lolling, his bony chin quivering until his thin beard went up and down, like a billy goat's.

A hundred and fifty. It will give me a new start in life, medication for my face, food, rest, clothes, until I could get my bearings. I nod faint heartedly, and instantly, with his spine arching up like a bow, he begins to slobber at my breasts, like a child at its mother's utter. Unbuttoning his pants, he takes it out and finishes with his hand, staining the wallpaper beside me. Rising, he leans against me, weakly, his complexion now like pale wax which seems to sag from the bones, and his eyes are jaded, dull, with a lack-luster film covering them. Sweat beads his forehead, beneath tangles of damp hair, and his thin lips are plastic white, colorless.

I squirm free.

"I want my money," I say directly as I hurry into my clothes, desperate to take my leave of this shabby, chemical-smelling room, this evil, degenerateman, this hysterical scene.

"Come back in the morning," he says in a whisper, coughing hoarsely, an unmistakable T.B. cough. "Will have to go to the bank, write a check."

"But I want it now!" I protest.

"You'll get your whoring wage . . . in the morning."

His dark eyes are glaring, beady again.

I am again on the beach, alone Collins Avenue. I feel unclean. The salt spray, the fine gleaming sand, the ocean smell does little to help. The hideous face keeps coming back, the pursed lips, pulling, withdrawing, the strings of sweaty hair, the rolling, undulating eyes! My soul cringes. Here, amid these swarms of fun seeking-people, I am alone with my self-reproach. God and I hold the center of the stage, and frantically, driven, I beg his forgiveness. But instead of his face, the same one I had seen since childhood, I see Swain, Mama, Thad. It is they who condemn . . . not God. It is they who have seen my wrong and, in seeing, seek repentance. It is to them whom I must offer myself as sacrifice. It is they who will put demands on my life, the life I am to lead from this night on, and I know this profoundly. I know it through their love of me, and my deep love for them. I have betrayed them, in betraying myself.

On the verge of tears, hungry, misplaced, afraid, my face throbbing, feverish, with no promise of shelter tonight, on this tiny Inlet, canopied with luxurious hotel suites, servants to cater to every beck and call, instinctively I hurry to the bus station, the only public place I know where I might remain throughout the long night till morning so that I could claim my one hundred and fifty dollars.

With my suitcase in hand, and the flux of human traffic, I easily get by as a tourist. In the washroom I bathe my face in cold water, tie a yellow bandana over my hair . . . to help hide my bruises . . . replace my shades, paint my lips, and resume my place in the waiting room. A nightmare of waiting, reading a left-over paper, a forgotten magazine, strolling, reading posters for the hundredth time, pausing at the water fountain, the book racks, the pinball machines, the jukebox, careful to represent myself as the happy, independant woman, going somewhere important, or returning from somewhere important.

Finally, a little after daybreak I am back at Milton's studio. It is empty. He has vacated the place, camera, lights, props, all! I sit down in the empty room, with its gashed wallpaper, its ceiling drooping like torn tent flaps, and cry like a child. My face hurts. I am starved for food. My tortured, frustrated mind whirls like a sickening merry-go-round. My future is a vacuum . . . a dark, hollow abyss!

Afraid, frantic now, I haven't the courage to return to the streets; those faces . . . faces lovely, handsome, lean, fat, old, young, but rich, well fed, happy! I want to die. To give up. To give myself over to fate, God, or the Devil. There is no future. No hope.

If only my face . . . If only I had my former beauty! If only I looked like I did before I met Gil! The streets, the beaches, the hotels, the sleek, leather upholstered cars, were filled with men . . . young men, good looking men, marines, sailors, soldiers . . . lonely men, far from home like me, lonely, sex hungry men!

Oh, God! I cry, laying my face in my trembling hands. How cruel can you be?

How cruel could fate be? To set me down in a land swarming with available men, yet take away my one weapon for conquering them . . . my beauty.

Lifting my head, I glance about me, these haggar walls, these fly-specked windows, the sky seen diml through them, the floor with its multitudes of scars, th unpainted doors falling back on their hinges, lik gaping, toothless mouths, and I know I must get out o this room, this web of depravity, this dark den o degenerate love, of twisted, mutilated sex, and I thin desperately, but coldly, with a new calculating mind men are the cause of this. Men have put me here .. here in this hideous, empty room. Yet, in the back o my mind, somewhere in the darkness of it, a low voic calls to me, whispers softly: No, Attala Rose. You hav done this to yourself. Always, you have hurt yourself That night at Oakleigh . . . was your beginning. This i only the end of your beginning, not the beginning o the end.

I hear this in my mind, see the words marked on my conscience, like a brand, a monstrous scar, and I shake from the fear of it, the fear of my future . . . a future without Mama, Swain, Thad. And I think in a terror over which I have no control: if I was like this with their love, what will I become without it?

The terror of this thought, like a thunderbolt, shakes my frame, awakens something of needed courage within me, and I leave this room of corrupt memories and again face the terror-filled streets.

I wander the beach like a lost soul. People pass me as if in a dream. Shadow shapes following shadow shapes, faces, dim, distant, looming, frightening, terrible, nothing shapes against a nothingness skyline. Sounds float past. Music pours like liquid nothing. Laughter is but a veil of mist in a cruel world. Then, as if the nightmare broke away, I see Gil sitting on his motorcycle. He is looking at me, a long, thoughtful look. At the sight of him, his tightly bluejeaned legs spread wide so as to balance the cycle upright, his naked bronzed arms thrust out to the throttle controls, his hair blowing in the evening wind, all the shackles of my wearisome predicament fall away from me, and I see in him a welcoming salvation, an oasis in this hell-hole desolation.

I hurry up to him, my hands out, my heart bursting with a new hope for life, thrilled, as if I was beholding the new Christ. But as I approach him, he puts the juice to the motorcycle and takes off up Collins Avenue, north, towards Ft. Lauderdale.

I remain, glued to the spot, until he disappears amidst the heavy traffic, then I return to the beach. I sit down on a bench facing the Atlantic ocean, too desperate, too numbed to move. I ask myself a thousand times . . . why did he go? There is no answer.

The waves, coming in dark, dismal rows, like an army of soldiers, tells me there is no answer. He is my last hope. And I have lost him. I have lost him to the namelessness of this beach, this alien inlet where I discovered something of both his love, and his hate.

With a sad attempt at transferring my interest, I watch the people on the beach. Couples sit with their families. A girl and a boy are sharing one beach towel, huddled lovingly. Teenage boys are leaping the waves close to the water. A child is picking up shells. A lone man, obviously a soldier, in white trunks strolls along the strip of wet sand, his body tanned, his profile powerful beneath his crew-cut. An old couple sit placidly, as if listening to the wind.

As darkness comes on one of the group leaves, then another gets up and then, as if summoned, they all leave, leave as though they cannot endure the loneliness without human companionship, and I am left, more lonely than all, against the vast stretch of darkness and water. The stars come out. The wind becomes cold, threatening to drive me indoors and yet, having come to the world's end, I can only remain.

I go down into the sand, almost to the waters edge and, taking a beach towel from my suitcase, I stretch it out and lie down. I lie down on the most expensive sandpile in the world, destitute, alone, forgotten. To my west lies a world of riches, of glamour, of glitter, as bountiful as the twinkling galaxy above me, and to my feet lies the war and the world. And somewhere between the two is Swain, Mama, Thad.

Their absence hardens something within the fiber of my being, crystalized now by privation, despair. And I know something within me is changing. That tomorrow I will be different, prepared and made ready to face the callousness of theworld.

Chapter Thirteen

The cold awakens me. Though my trenchcoat is warm against my body, shielding out the dampness, my legs are frozen, and my face feels swollen, petrified. I raise up on one elbow and gaze about me. A faint red glow shows in the east. The Atlantic is still, like an endless mirror, without a wave or even ripple. Sitting up, I brush back my hair, make up my face, cringe at the cuts and bruises, deep purple now surrounded by yellowish flesh stains. I am so sore, so weary, I can barely move. Too, I am famished, not having eaten since early the evening Gil left me. That was two days and two nights ago. I had never gone without food that long before in my life.

Standing, I notice that the streets are vacant of people. Not even one car, taxi, or bus on Collins Avenue going either north nor south, the dawn of a dead world and, picking up my things, I head toward Surfside. It is two, maybe three, hours left before daylight and, remembering a supermarket near Indian Creek Village, I decide to go there, to make a serach through the garbage cans in hopes of finding a few scraps of edible food, for I am penniless.

Reaching the front entrance I notice, and with glad surprise, that the milk truck has already dumped the days supply of milk. I quickly slip a quart bottle into my trenchcoat, then hurry round to the rear of the store. There, after rambling through several smelly cans, into damp paper sacks, mushy wrappings, limp stalks of celery, rotten tomatoes, sticky ice cream cartons, I find a partially eaten sandwich, an orange, a few puffy grapes, and several slices of bread. Wrapping these in a clean newspaper, I return to the bench and, under the curtain of dawn, I gulp down the food, the milk, with relish. No seven-course banquet could have had better results on my body, my mental outlook. Though tainted, specked with mold, the food returned my strength to me, replenishing my vitality, as a good rain replenishes the soil. My vision seemed to clear. My mind functioned, and I could think, could reason. It was like partaking of the last supper, the flesh and blood of the new covenant, and now, sitting on this lonely stretch of sand, watching wild-eyed as the gay, glittering world of Miami awakened, a light blinking here, a window glowing there, the honk of a lone car horn, soft, drifting music, the hum of voices being heralded into life, I really know at last the true meaning of the sacrament. The tasting of the flesh and blood of Christ. I feel whole, new, enspirited. And there is hope. Nothing more than a shred, yet, nevertheless hope.

I return to the bus station, tidy up, redo my face, apply a thick coating of pancake cream to erase Gil's brand, then once more, braver now, go into the streets. My walk is more brisk. I manage a smile. I even feel like swaying, enticingly, as my high heeled pumps make light taps on the wet pavement. No longer do I feel inferior, physically and mentally. I can fight back now. I can take the world by the horns and twist it to my will. I am my old self, bruised face or not. In fact, now with a full stomach, with my faculties in check, my scars fortify my courage. Determined, I will wear them like precious medals. I will make them useful.

Going through the swinging doors of the bus station I meet a cop face to face.

"Didn't I see you in here the other night?" he asks directly.

An old fear stirs, but I fight back.

"Yes, matter of fact I was," I answer readily, adjusting my shades, my hand purposely over my bruised eye.

"All night, too, I noticed." He comes right back.

"Waiting for my husband. He's due in any time now. But I don't know exactly what time he'll get in. The war you know, and such crazy bus schedules." I sigh disgustedly. "Every bus is crammed with service men." I lay a hand over my breasts. "Oh, I do hope he can catch one in time. This waiting is terrible."

He nods in agreement.

"His first furlough?"

"Oh, yes," I say excitedly. "And all the way from California."

"He'll get through," he says encouragingly, tipping his cap. "Our soldiers are a hardy bunch."

"Indeed they are," I agree, smiling, then pushing through the crowd which pours from the openings like water through a broken levee. And I think: What a clever little liar you are. But there is no pang of conscience, even though I realize that, subconsciously, I was using Swain as my foil in answering the policeman.

Swain! If only I could see him now, at this moment. If only he could sweep me into his arms, smother me with wild kisses. If only we could go somewhere together, lock away the world, blot out everything that had happened since last we were together, everything but our love, our needing each other, our bodies filling their thirst. But—and I draw a hand over my face as I think this . . . he must not see me like this, not after Gil had . . . foolish! So foolish to think of him now, foolish to want him. Yet, I rush to the Post Office, check at the General Delivery window to see if I have any letters. The clerk hands me an envelope. I read the postmark. It is from Swain.

Thank God!

Locating a secluded spot, I tear open the letter and read:

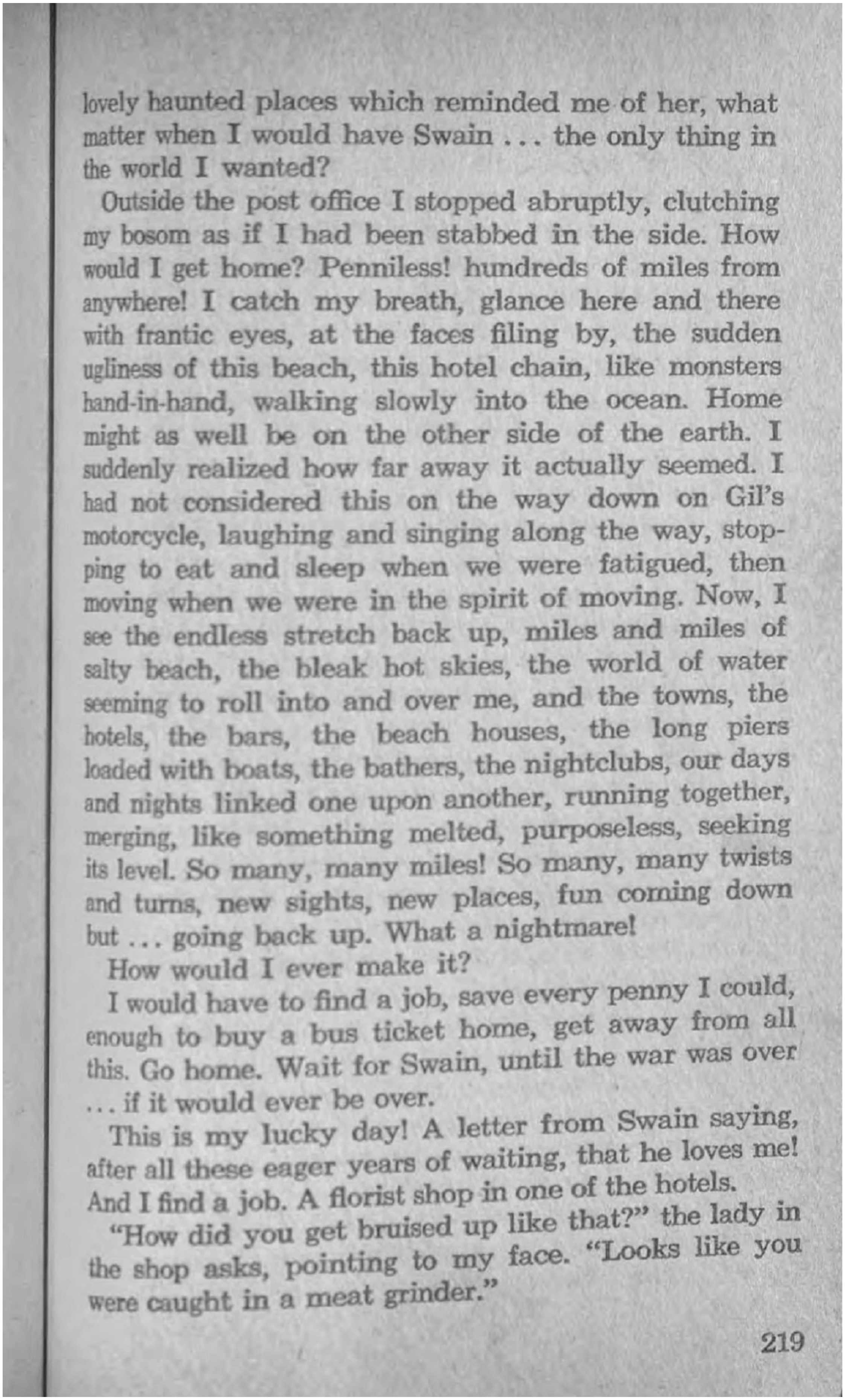
Dear Princess

Still in Florida? Hope not. God, how I miss you. I realize I have acted as if I don't give a damn in the past, back when we were at Oakleigh together, but I do. I do give a damn, now that I am away from you and can think about it all. I want you home at Oakleigh, my home, our home, home with all the other things I love and cherish, and hope to keep always. Baby, our unit is being shipped out, to somewhere in the Pacific. Wish I knew, but they won't tell us. Big secret! Everything is a big secret! But, Tala, whatever happens, where ever I go, where ever you go, I so want you to know. I love you. I really do. Not just your body, but all of you. Every precious thing about you. I was too stupid to realize it when I was at home, before the war. But I've wised up. Wait for me. Please God, wait for me.

Love
Swain

He loved me!

My heart on wings, I leave the post office like an avenging angel, eager to take back all that I had been denied. I was going home, home to Oakleigh, and wait . . . wait for Swain if it took a hundred years. My shame, facing Mama's grave, the farm, Papa, all the



lovely haunted places which reminded me of her, what matter when I would have Swain . . . the only thing in the world I wanted?

Outside the post office I stopped abruptly, clutching my bosom as if I had been stabbed in the side. How would I get home? Penniless! hundreds of miles from anywhere! I catch my breath, glance here and there with frantic eyes, at the faces filing by, the sudden ugliness of this beach, this hotel chain, like monsters hand-in-hand, walking slowly into the ocean. Home might as well be on the other side of the earth. I suddenly realized how far away it actually seemed. I had not considered this on the way down on Gil's motorcycle, laughing and singing along the way, stopping to eat and sleep when we were fatigued, then moving when we were in the spirit of moving. Now, I see the endless stretch back up, miles and miles of salty beach, the bleak hot skies, the world of water seeming to roll into and over me, and the towns, the hotels, the bars, the beach houses, the long piers loaded with boats, the bathers, the nightclubs, our days and nights linked one upon another, running together, merging, like something melted, purposeless, seeking its level. So many, many miles! So many, many twists and turns, new sights, new places, fun coming down but . . . going back up. What a nightmare!

How would I ever make it?

I would have to find a job, save every penny I could, enough to buy a bus ticket home, get away from all this. Go home. Wait for Swain, until the war was over . . . if it would ever be over.

This is my lucky day! A letter from Swain saying, after all these eager years of waiting, that he loves me! And I find a job. A florist shop in one of the hotels.

"How did you get bruised up like that?" the lady in the shop asks, pointing to my face. "Looks like you were caught in a meat grinder."

"A motorcycle accident," I lie.

"A nice-looking girl like you shouldn't be riding a motorcycle," she reprimands, giving me a disapproving look. "Never liked them . . . noisy, dangerous, made for bums." She comes around the counter, surveys me more closely. "Well, honey," she sighs, her hands on her hips. "Maybe you couldn't help it. I need someone bad. I can't handle this tourist bunch alone, especially those Yankee women. They don't know a camellia from a corkscrew. Besides," and she stares at me once more. "Your face will heal, in time. And you're a good-looking girl. Now . . . what did you say your name was?"

I work diligently for two weeks. Then the blow falls.

I tried to save every penny I could. I bought needed clothes, cosmetics, medicine for my face, essential food but only the bulky kind, which filled, and I hoarded the rest; kept it in an envelope tucked away in my little room back of the shop until I had enough for a bus fare home.

Then one morning, no sooner than I had walked into the cool air-conditioned portion where the more delicate cut flowers were kept . . . to help with the sortings . . . my life crumbled like an eggshell.

"Tala, where is your husband stationed?" she asked, not bothering to look up from the sprays of bright dahlias which framed her like a wreath of blood.

"Why, I don't know," I answered, taken by surprise. I did not know what to say, or think, but instinct warned me.

"It's a cruel war," she rambled on, still not looking up. "Cruel to take young couples and tear their lives apart, away from one another. A girl needs her husband most when she's pregnant. You should inquire about him through the local recruiting office, have him sent home, if he is not already overseas. They are most helpful about such matters."

My brain reels. Still what she has said does not register.

"But, I'm not married," I blurt out, stupidly.

She turns, glares at me. She drops a newly-cut dahlia.

"But, my dear. You're pregnant!"

I felt as if the blood had left my body. Pregnant! Me, pregnant?

My hand goes over my mouth to ward off a scream.

She looks at me, puzzled.

"But . . . you didn't know?"

I shake my head.

"But who?" she mutters, her hands spread wide. "The young man—who?"

Swain!

I think of our love, what we had done together. But I knew he was not the one . . . but, God! If only he could have been. Then I think . . .

Gil!

Terror, the face of Swain, the deep essence of our love, all sweep through me in one frantic force, making me go weak at the knees, darkening, like a roaring black cloud, my future . . . my hopes with Swain.

Pregnant! I was to have another man's child! Gils! Not Swain's! Like a burning flash of lightning, swiftly, maddeningly, I see Swain overseas, fighting, dying I see him lying, like so many other Marines before him, in some muddy ditch, his fine body covered with blood!

Swain! What have I done to you? Swain!

I think drearily of all the times he and I had lain together, and nothing had ever happened, and with Gil in one night of wild deviltry . . . and this!

I reel. I clutch at the glass counter, and in a kind of dumb madness I think: what am I going to do? My hands clutch at nothing, swaying things as blackness overcomes me. Things fall. I hear broken glass. Out of it a voice, a sweet, pleasant voice . . . like Mama's . . .

"I didn't mean to frighten you, dear. Now you gone and fainted. I'll get you some water, water . . . water . . . wat . . ."

Chapter
Fourteen

I hitched a ride with an Air Force captain as far as St. Petersburg. He was on his way to MacDill Air Force Base directly below Tampa. We get an apartment for the night at Mary's Motel and Grill on Pass A Grille Beach. He had been injured while in flight training at Florida City, he explained, which rendered him unable to do either good or harm to women, and he took me sexually, but unnaturally.

He had been a regular customer at the florist shop and, after my fainting spell, the lady who ran the place, in fear of my becoming a burden I know, asked, or persuaded him to bring me this far. I was thankful. For I could not endure Miami another moment. Not after my bad news. Whatever it was, whatever it represented to others, it held only misery, despair, heartbreak for me. Like the day I had to leave Mama, her grave, because of my wrong against her, so I had to leave Miami because of my disloyalty to Swain. I had to go somewhere. Where, I did not know.

Yet now, heartbreakingly, I could not go home!

Gil had ruined that for me.

Though the Captain was but an interlude in my life, a dark formless form going over my body, lolling lips and tongue that explored every portion of me, my body a cure for his illness, his malformation, he had his uses. Our union was my baptism in sex, in waves of men. I was to become immersed in a succession of male bodies, remembering an old saying I once heard from Papa concerning a bad woman in our section of the hills.

Loving only one man and never being satisfied by any.

The bonds that held me so profoundly, so determinedly to Swain, his love, my love for him, had slipped now, had become untied with my pregnancy, and I drifted on the tides of pleasure, taking it the way I could, and with each, floating free, further and further away from the deep, human love I felt for Swain.

I had to punish myself. And the only way I knew how to do this, since I had wronged him so that the wrong was becoming a physical evidence . . . I had to sink into the mire of male flesh, to wallow as they wanted me to wallow, in whatever position, abandon all rules, surrender to something I considered essentially stronger than myself, my own convictions, my own morals.

Even that night on Pass A Grille Beach with the Captain, listening to his animal groans, I felt the bonds loosening, felt them untangle and slip away, setting me free. I had lost all that I wanted: Swain, his grave beauty, his dark savagery; so I was free to pursue its counterpart in the slime of male rut, the small measures they gave of themselves, their horridly vast differences, their dirty, ugly little sex whims, their madness which was more monstrous than human . . . if men are ever human at all in their relations to sex. The beauty of Swain, his very maleness when he made love, the manner in which he sought me physically, so well-trained in the art, all were vanished now. And I saw instead, in my quest of other men, that terrible distance, that tangible something which set them apart, that difference which would always make me love him, want him, even when I lay in the arms of someone else.

When the Captain reported to MacDill Air Force Base for duty, he gave me twenty dollars and left me at Mary's apartments on Pass A Grille Beach. There, having lost everything, my pride, my self respect, even my morals; doomed by my hated, despised pregnancy, unable ever to find my way back to Swain, to his love ... with a clear conscience, I abandoned myself to debauchery . . . or, a better word . . . decay. For here is where the soul dies, which is more fatal than the death of the body.

If the war was over, if Swain was home from the services at Oakleigh, I could go back to him, love him, beloved, and perhaps we could go on, as though nothing had happened in between. He might never suspect anything. But it was I who knew. The men . . . the long line of men . . . and I would have to live with that.

So . . . I could never go back.

There were many young men on Pass A Grille Beach, on Treasure Island, along the three mile stretch north toward Maderia beach, and they were available, eager and willing. They always paid. Some of the handsomest men I have ever seen paraded this stretch of white sand, the cream of America's crop of youth, the healthiest by our standards, and all of them were sex-hungry. Tanned, clean with their crew cuts, thick of thigh and calf muscle, small of waist, wide spread of shoulder, bright, sober, good swimmers, wonderful athletes, they were in mint condition. Too, most of them had money, in training at one of Florida's many bases, from MacDill, Orlando Air Base, Jacksonville Naval Air Station, and from the Naval Air Station in Pensacola.

At first, I culled them, mostly by their age and their physical appearance. If they did not have that clean, all-American look, if they were not robustly young, I turned them down. But I soon learned that older, less attractive men liked sex in all forms as well, and that they paid more for my services. Aware of their shortcomings, in comparison to the dashing younger men, they went all out with their wallet in order to have a good time. Too, with the war raging, they never knew from one day to the next when they would be shipped out, and every second counted. They crowded the streets in South Pasadena, a section of St. Petersburg on Boca Clega Bay, in Pinellas Park during weekends, the art gallery, the golf course, the pools, and at Largo and Clearwater at night, cramming the strip shows and the dance halls.

If only I wasn't pregnant! If only I wasn't expecting this hated child, what a time I would have!

Each morning I took a tape measure and measured my waistline, dreading the time when I would appear too obvious and the servicemen would no longer desire sex with me. Too, I lived in terror that some experienced man, either married with children or older and wiser about the physical functions of the female, would discover my condition while having relations with me, and give me another beating like Gil had given me, or put the bad mouth on me to the others.

I made certain I always looked my best. I bought good clothes, or what could be bought, for at best styles were drab, that war drabness which seemed to follow the mood of death and grief. Skirts were at the knees. Flop hats dominated. And about the most colorful, cheerful outfit a girl could find was slacks, silky, loose-fitting blouses, and sandals. If you were lucky, high heeled pumps with ankle straps (shack-up shoes the navy men called them), and white dresses spangled with brads or brass studs. Hair remained long, usually pulled back and tied with a ribbon, and female beauty help was at a minimum.

Though I had always loved pretty clothes and, with Mama's agile needle hand, had always looked delicately feminine, I managed a few tricks with the needle myself, altering or adding this, blending colors, designing from remembered drawings Swain and I had turned out at Oakleigh, and I prided myself on the results.

I was getting plenty to eat, at dinner with an officer from one of the services every night, exercise and sun on the beach by day, and my natural good health added much to my present beauty. My face healed, I gave my long hair its hundred brush strokes each night, despite some lover asleep on my bed and I was beautiful. I had always been beautiful. I was the kind of girl most men sought for physical pleasure, not to mention their demands on my time socially, and this environment lent itself to my stamina, my feeling for life, caused my skin to fairly glow, and my eyes to go starry when men looked at me, wantingly. It seemed that the more men made love to me the more my health and good looks improved, as Swains organ in me long ago had caused the bud within me to blossom, to trigger my instinct to beauty.

I had never lost that wildness, that lusty physical essence ... like a fox in the sunlight ... even when I was down, and this was my greatest aid in the pursuit of men, and lovers. Men liked vivacious girls, especially if they were themselves drab, for being in the presence of one so filled with life invigorated them within. My presence was like a tonic to a soldier, like a sip of brandy. To them, I represented the ideal pin-up girl, the Betty Grable, the girl they wanted to screw. And they usually let me know this within an hour of our first meeting. Not that they were not generous, courteous, and kind. They were. They courted m admiringly. Yet, they sought me physically, and eac with his individual brand of sex. And they had thei varities!

Mama would have turned over in her grave, Pap would have cursed, Thad would have completely disowned me, and Swain would have killed me on sight i they had known the numerous sexual diversions I ha played to climax with the men on this fabulous beach They wanted me to do everything and anything t them, and vica versa. I never dreamed that men had s many desires. Yet, in their uniforms they all seeme the same; male chasing female, male wanting to screw female . . . but, God! once in the bed!

In the bed they wanted to do everything but screw. But many of them, dare I say most of them, wanted t do that too, along with their other little diversions.

But I learned that it is characteristic of the female nature to revel in the adoration of men, however they may adore you. That man who is taking you, making love to you . . . however that might be . . . that you are thrilling him and being thrilled in return, is enough. It is basic that man must have woman. And this is all that women should know. The rest lies in being adored by them, caressed by them, moulded by them, pliable to them, their every touch, their most casual grasp, to be theirs however they want you . . . just to be theirs.

There is nothing within nature that is not natural, and man's deep want for woman is the most natural of all things. How he wants her, how he takes her is of no significence.

So this became my creed. Not that I willed it. Not that I was trained for it. Not that I had a weakness for it. But that instinctively I was born for men, created for their pleasure.

How many countless women have declared this? And each must say it a different way, and for a different reason. But whatever their reason, mine was that I was a natural . . . from that wild dark night with Swain at Oakleigh, that moment in the cold moonlight when I beheld for the first time a boy's naked body, the grave beauty of it, and all a haunted refrain from my youth, my childhood, from that fatal day my horse Cisco died, and I saw his enormous organs, his hind quarters streaked with blood—awesome, beautiful!

Yet, I loved Swain, and would love no other man, though I gave my body to many, in that short reign of carnal pleasure and profit before I would be forced to give it up and bear my unwanted child.

In earlier times of my girlhood, I had heard whisperings of doing things to get rid of it, of other girls at school, like Maybelle Bonwell and Lily Brenson describing the aftermath of: "Oh, I was scared to death when the doctor touched me," and, "He made me lie down on the floor naked, and he took a huge pair of tweezers and . . ." and worst of all: "There was so much blood I thought I was going to die!"

But no, miserable as I was, hating the unborn child as I did, I could not bring myself to go through with such a thing. Not that I was afraid of death and I had heard about other girls who had not pulled through. But my own inner conscience, my lifelong religious belief held that it was sinful to destroy a child in the womb . . . was the same as murder!

I saved my money toward that inevitable time, saw a doctor, and tried to make the best of the situation. That Christmas I sent Papa gifts, small worthless items to Dolly and Claudine, wrote that I was doing splendid, and on the beginning of 1943, approaching my twentieth year, I packed my things and went to Tampa. I did not want the soldiers to see me as I would gradually become, those dashing, beautifully-built boys who had lain with me, who had praised my good looks, who had flattered, teased, coaxed, who had made violent, passionate love to me, and had returned time after time for more. Vain, too prideful to completely lose their dangerously casual flattery, their cavalier flirtations with me, desperate for fear they might see me later, and would certainly lose interest in me, I fled from the sex scene.

Alone with my crime, carrying my guilt like a sinner wears a hair shirt of shame, I exiled myself from all temptations of men. And like an animal that burrows itself in the ground, I sought out my alcove, my den of safety until I brought forth my unwanted child, healed my wounds, then, alone again, but braver, face the world and the light of day again.

Chapter Fifteen

I checked in at the Alamo Hotel on Franklin street. It did not take me long to learn that this street, with its breadlines, its dirty bars, its string of strip joints, was the skid row of Tampa.

"Just stand in the door of your hotel, deary," a coarse, touseled prostitute said to me, after seeing me wandering up and down the street aimlessly. "Then the fuzz won't bust you."

I discovered later what she meant. About once a week the Tampa police moved in on Franklin Street in a clean up sweep. If you stood at your hotel entrance they assumed you had a lodging place, otherwise, along with everyone walking, they put you in a compound north of Tampa. For here on this notorious street, linked in a continuous gaudy chain of bars, cheap hotels, pawn shops, Goodwill stores, lounges with door flung wide, a semi-nude woman dancing within, advertising, many wanted criminals migrated. It was a no-man's-land for the outcast, the ex-con, prostitutes on their last legs, winos, dope-pushers. queers, vagrants, men and women fleeing the law, foreigners, AWOL soldiers, derelicts of every description, every age, exiles, misfits, oddballs . . . you name it.

They were safe on this street, if only for a little while; it was a breathing place, a lair where they could lick their wounds, catch their breath, rearm or, as one soldier told me while we sat in a bar beneath the Alamo Hotel: "You could die on this pissy street and no one would care. Some men have come here and have stayed the rest of their life. Once you're in, you can't get out."

This terrorized me, in a sense, and I clung to my little dab of money all the tighter, fighting desperately for the time when I would need it for the delivery of my child.

Mainly, I tried to keep my health. This had been instilled in me since early childhood by Mama's strict declaration: a healthy body is a sinless body, and, too, though I did not want the child, I did want to bring it into the world healthy and sound, for its sake, if not my own. It was Gil's legacy to me, all this misery, this worry, this fear borne out of a foolish boy's sexual whim. And though I had no love for him, a vague admiration perhaps, at times I tried to form a picture in my mind of what the child would be like . . . certainly good-looking . . . since both Gil and I were healthy, attractive people. But each time I thought of the child being his, which was almost constantly, I cried because it was not Swain's. If it had been his I would have carried it willingly, proudly, lovingly. Instead, it was a burden in my body, more like a stone which impeded my progress, which bore on my conscience maddeningly, which became like some kind of fatal disease, threatening my happiness, even my life.

The men on Franklin Street looked what they represented to the world. None of them were in the least bit attractive. Dirty, rancid from the odor of old clothes worn for weeks, their fingers tobacco-stained, their breath thick from wine and whiskey, their hair unkempt, their one ambition other than whiskey, was sex, and in all its deviations.

Franklin Street became a nightmare to me, a dark, endless dream from which there was no awakening. The only beautiful things in my life were my thoughts, those rare moments when I lay alone in my stained, squeaky bed, when the light was out and I could not see the wallpaper moldering on the walls, the torn sections, like ghosts, evil shapes, and in my mind I could see Swain's handsome face, home, the flowers, Mama's grave, Oakleigh shrouded in moss. Then, I would take out my cherished memories of them, like thumbing through an old album, and live them again and again. Each day I managed to get my rose for Mama, which more and more in this shabby hole, became something essential and passionately beautiful. And the men who lay with me, vagrants, groaning men, in most cases too drunk for sex, too hopped up on dope (which I loathed and in which I never dared indulge) crying miserably in their intoxicated stupors, moaning like driven animals beside me, flinging out their arms or naked legs in drunken delirium, slobbering over my body, tongueing me with their smelly kisses, all were but formless shapes in my life, a few dollars here, a meal, a night of dancing, some worthless gift, dark masculine forms turgid in some meaningless desire which dominated my world. Men, any man, it seemed, as long as he was a man, as long as he could parade before me naked, his proud masculinity a haunting reminder of the fleeting images of my childhood, the more enormous he was in his loins . . . like Swain . . . the more essential to me in my ghost dream.

I learned that poor men, men deprived of education and wealth, oddly, were more modest than sophisticated men. Unlike the sailors on Pass A Grille Beach who loved to show off their bodies in front of me, these lower-class, under-privileged men, escapees from society, ignorant, unworldly, usually cut off the lights unless they were too drunk to know or care. I learned, too, that intelligence breeds sexual familiarity, that the more educated a man was the more eager his sexual drive, the more lasting his yearning. The ignorant use sex as a gratification of appetite. Quick, relentless, animal in motion, then complete abandon of emotion, strangers, cold, sometimes hostile. They never make good lovers, for sex to them is not an art, as it becomes to the man of intelligence, of good health and breeding. And it is the lack of art in these men of the streets . . . who drink too much and think too little . . . which makes sex something vile and deplorable. And this, no doubt, is why the prostitude (especially the prostitutes on this street, long used to men using their bodies for sex only to the point of climax), become in time frigid alcoholics. A physical act, a warm body in which to sperm, a basin in which to release their tension, and hostility. With every nicety eroded away they were as the baser animals, the lowest form of the ape. Men of the stone age, these worthless, depraved males which roamed Franklin street and made for me this street, this city, the most-hated place in the world Yet, I needed them with a ferocity equal only to thei frantic need for women.

And so, in this concrete jungle, I lived, seeking something out of my childhood I could not name seeking a substitute, perhaps for the Swain I had clun to and lost, seeking the counterpart of his dark, masculine beauty, the male with the organ like Swain's stripped with enormous veins, turgid there in its dar nest of hair, swinging when he moved, a groping mysterious thing, hauntingly beautiful, as an animal i beautiful, wild in that way an animal is wild, bearin within its enormity something which masters, whic has the power to break, to force surrender.

And in this search, I joined the other women of the street, although I was pregnant (men here didn't care, since they did not seek beauty); I became their confidante in the market of sex. And, like them, I picked up the schedule, remaining in my hotel until about four in the evening then, as if called by an unseen herald, would go down into the street, to the bars, the lounges, the strip joints where sex in all forms is the order of the day, occupation, bread, life itself.

Though I did not consider myself equal to these shabby women, old, hard before their time, vulgar of voice, habitual smokers, too heavy drinkers, I did what they did. And I mingled with them. I learned to use their language. I picked up important tips from them, information about men who frequented these bars, men on the make, men who, through instinct or no longer caring, did not cull the women who they sought out for sexual pleasures. So on this street, amid these derelicts from every section of America, I was safe despite my condition. Not so, if I had remained on Pass A Grille Beach. Men on that beach, especially service men, had hundreds of girls to choose from, beautiful, talented girls, girls with plenty of money out on a fling, girls on vacation, girls from defense plants in East Tampa and Temple Terrace. Too, there were dancers, show people from the summer quarters of Ringling Brothers circus in Sarasota, just south of St. Petersburg, and the world's swimming champions. Here on Franklin Street, miles from a sunny beach, within these roach-infested walls, snuff-colored bars, smoky strip joints, the women were in their middle thirties, or, if not, they looked thirty and beyond. These women never ventured from Franklin Street. Though Florida was swarming with clean, white sand beaches, these women never swam, never sunbathed, didn't even own bathing suits, their complexions pale, anemic from a life indoors, in bars dark as caves, in closet-size rooms occupied only by a cot, a chest of drawers perhaps, a makeshift bath, and if lucky a window from which they could look down on the narrow, sex-crawling street. They were has-beens, women who had made out in other places, other sex cities, good-looking once—once before they were used up in the meat mill of dissipation, and came to Tampa, this gaudy, night street to (as they termed it) retire. But they were good to me, mainly because I was so much younger, so much fresher, and dare I say more innocent? They mothered me in a sense. I found in them a devotion, an honesty found in few women, and their loyalty as friends, even with rivals, I discovered to be astounding. Coarse to the outside world, callous to those, mainly men, who had exiled them to this utter limbo, they had enormous affection for those they regarded as friends, and there was nothing they wouldn't do for me.

When I was really beginning to show, dangerously obvious even to men (usually the last to learn) these women introduced me to men who accepted my condition on the grounds that they wanted only brief encounters of companionship, a girl . . . a pretty girl . . . to talk with while they drank, someone to dance with, a goodnight hug or kiss. Though these men were a rarity, in any city, on any street, and especially on this street, they were a Godsend to me, for their little handouts, a frequent meal or smokes, added to my savings and against that dreaded time when I could no longer rely on men for food and lodging and keep. Not that I had not looked for work. But strangely, provokingly, each time I thought I had landed something, I would automatically, mysteriously be summoned back into that world of the streets, that night street of sex, and I would palm it off with the thought that I had plenty of time yet to play, then I'd go to work. Once I did work for almost a week in a pawn shop on South Franklin, but one afternoon while I stood under the front awning watching it rain, feeling homesick and blue, and saw a soldier pick up a dark-haired girl across the street, I immediately quit.

Why I had come to this street, this section of Tampa I did not know. But I seemed to gauge the place, even on that first day, as if from some unmistakable inner knowledge I had possessed from childhood. I seemed to merge, to come back so to speak, like a foraging bird come home to roost. Yet . . . this was not my world. Prostitution was not my natural trade. I was young. I was pretty . . . many men had told me this . . . and I was sharp of mind, intelligent. My natural talent in designing could have merited me much in social standing, friends, position. Yet, out of my deep love for my mother, the wrong I had done her in living with Swain, my sense of life's values was dulled. In my grief over Mama and in my deep love for Swain, I lost my way completely. Nothing which had seemed important in my girlhood seemed so anymore, though I was but twenty. Albeit I had, seemingly, striven for good when I looked back, which I too often did these desperate lonely days, I saw how little I actually had fought to preserve my ideals. I had clung momentarily but, like my love for Swain, my great admiration for Mama, I grasped once frantically then, like ropes slipping through my hands, I lost them on my downward plunge. Now, the crevice seemed too deep, too steep for me ever to climb back, to regain all that I had lost, and I had lost much: most of all, respect for myself.

But no one seemed to care, actually, what I did, what happened to me, so, I tried to recoup that loss, to punctuate the care no one had for me in trysts with these men on Franklin Street. Yet, I had met no man, and I went with many, who impressed me enough to remember his name, or even his face. They had been to me a long parade of naked bodies, bodies without faces, without names, bodies that sometimes smelled so vile the tiny bedroom was stifling, bodies which reeked of cheap cologne, bodies with mats of hair on chest and limbs, bodies smooth, wiry, bodies which, out of the dim darkness had only torsos, were armless, limbless, tall, skinny, fat, young, robustly young, and old . . . God! how old!

In this mockery of sex, for men seemed to take so much for granted in women, I closed my mind to all except the doing. Like one who might wait on a table, and see, day after day, hundreds of faces she serves but remembers none, so did my own memory evolve of the men who lay with me, who did whatever they desired to do with me, then to vanish into the darkness of this street, into the unremembering vacuum of my mind. Men had even reminded me of encounters with them, the night, the place, and I still had not recalled their faces, the incidents, and I had departed from them confused, baffled, and all these smoky bars, these ugly black walls, these holes in the wall, like deep mysterious caverns from which shadow shapes emerged . . . all, was time out of mind.

And there were moments, stifling moments, when I had to leave this street, when I had to draw a fresh breath, see something other than this murky, haunted sex scene. On these discouraging, moody times, I would go South on Franklin, into the heart of Tampa, beyond the row of strip joints where doors, like toothless, open mouths, revealed the naked forms within, their breasts like luminous, glowing lamps dimly within that gloom, past the shrill blatting of sex music, the throb of drums in cadence to gyrating hips, naked behinds, and to a movie, sometimes into Ybor City's Latin quarter for a quiet meal, but back again into the den of Franklin before nightfall.

I saw Lifeboat, and Watch on the Rhine with Bette Davis, Since You Went Away, and many more movies which, during the war, with so many men overseas, depicted the homefront, the girls back home or stories of patriotism. One afternoon, blue, sick with a homesickness I dared not admit, even to myself, I took a bus to Pinellas Park and there saw Gone With The Wind. I cried all the way through the showing, especially when I saw the plantation home, which was so much like Oakleigh; suffered at the death of Melanie, who seemed, in my endless loneliness, so much like Mama. When I came out of the movie I was overcome with genuine grief, and I made an oath I would leave this miserable Tampa, the ugliest city in the world, which I hated like the plague, and try in some way to find my way back home, to Papa who needed me I knew, and to Oakleigh where I could wait for Swain's return from the war. But when I went by the post office on my way into Franklin Street and stopped by the General Delivery window there was a letter from Aunt Pauline stating that Papa had been taken to Whitfield in Jackson, a mental hospital.

"Why don't you come home where you belong?" she asked, ending her cold, reproachful letter. "Haven't you hurt Hazel and Oliver enough?"

That night I remained in my hotel room and, without supper, cried myself to sleep.

With the news about papa, I sobered somewhat, and attempted in a dull way to regain my sense of proper values in life. I was lost, adrift in a limbo, and I tried to shake my mind back into its old, keen groove. Instead of going to the bars at night I remained in my room and read, working my way up to classic works such as Plato and Homer, and for a breather I mooned over my Flash Gorden collection. This was one part of my past which remained intact, and I managed each Sunday morning to pick up the funnies. Flash was fighting the Red Sword Invaders now on Earth (at the government's request to the author and artist, Alex Raymond, to boost morale in the armed forces) and he and Dale were imprisoned, awaiting execution. One block down from the Alamo Hotel was the Salvation Army, and I began to go there every night. Vagrants hung out there, tolerated a sermon, and attempted to sing religious songs with the pale women in blue in order to get coffee and doughnuts afterwards, paying the price of pretending religion, of faith in God in return for a mouthful of warm food to fill their wine-burned bellies. I thought it sacrilegious the way the Salvation Army doled out meager bits of food in exchange for their hard sermons against drunkenness and prostitution; cruel that they forced on men their own religious doctrine as a ticket to appease their gullets, but I attended their rallies, accepted their nightly offerings of goodwill and brotherhood, and sipped their coffee while they paved my way into heaven with their invection against the whores of Babylon, Sodom and Gomorra.

Too, I tried to keep up with the war, for Swain's sake more than mine, because he was overseas fighting, somewhere in the Pacific, and by knowing I felt closer to him somehow, felt we shared in the fighting, as if we fought together, side by side. I read the papers every day, listened to the hallway radio, and kept abreast of things between the playing of tunes now popular, All or Nothing At All, As Time Goes By, Comin' In On A Wing and a Prayer, That Old Black Magic, They're Either Too Young Or Too Old, You'll Never Know, and inspiring songs like, Oh, What a Beautiful Morning, and In the Blue of Evening.

The last letter I had received from Swain he was in New Zealand, training for combat. Other Marine units had pushed on to the Island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomons group, and I guessed that by now he was somewhere in that region, fighting . . . maybe dead.

Life was dead serious to me now, when but a short while back it had been some kind of silly game. So when two strippers from one of the joints on South Franklin street packed and headed north along the coastline in their forty-two Lincoln, I went with them.

I had met them one night after their show and had confronted them in their dressing room about a job helping with their costumes and, noticing my condition, they had taken me under their wings. They asked me to come along with them, to: "get outa this stinkin' hole!" the way they described Tampa, and I quickly agreed. This dirty city, with its ancient buildings, its foreigners, its sex-mad, drink-mad vagrants, was jaded for me, if it had even been otherwise, and I snapped at the opportunity to gain ground, to get as close to home as I could.

Home!

Vacated now, with Papa in a mental hospital and unable to keep up the place, it was without doubt growing up in weeds, the unplowed fields invaded with seedling pine and persimmon sprouts, Mama's flower garden choked with crab and Bermuda grass. I was needed there now, more than I had ever been needed, to restore the beloved temple of my childhood, bring it back, like my own conscience, into proper perspective in the ordered scheme of things. So as we sped northwestward, along the coastline, through Port Richey, Crystal River, Cross City and Steinhatchee, my shame, my months of anarchy left far behind, great expectations arose within me. I was galvanized into ambition, felt an energy within me which I had believed dead, and I foresaw a new goal for my wasted life. I saw, once my baby was born and I was at home at last, the many things I could do: put the farm in shape, bring Papa home, nurse him back to health, see all the neighbors, and Dolly and Claudine, and go to Oakleigh, work like a Titan, getting everything ready for Swain's return . . . if he ever returned!

I refused to think about that now. Other Marines had fought and lived. Why mightn't Swain?

The joy of getting closer and closer home, being near people I understood, my people, drove me onward, and I was like a migrating bird on its final mile, homeward bound. Only one thing burdened me now, slowed my progress, shortened my patience . . . my baby.

God! Would it ever be born?

Chapter Sixteen

There is a strip joint in Mobile, directly south of Prichard on Mobile Bay called The Purple Flamingo. Here, the two women I had ridden up with, who called themselves Dahlia Dee and Pepper Panta, went to work stripping for the late night show, decoys to lure in the hundreds of service men stationed at the Pensacola Naval Air Station and Eglin Air Force Base at Ft. Walton. They gave me a job helping with the costumes (or lack of them), stitching on artificial flowers, sewing broken bra-straps, replacing worn zippers, runs in mesh hose, polishing opera pumps, washing, ironing, and combing out wigs, working any way I could to improve their general appearance, to keep them as attractive as possible. It wasn't an easy task, since both women had many miles behind them ... hard, cruel miles, tortuous miles!

But I was grateful for the job. I occupied a couch in one corner of the small, shabby dressing room, managed to get ample food, for there was an enormous cafe adjoining the club, people left me alone, due to my condition, and Dahlia and Pepper were good to me.

They called me "Tiger Rose," fussed over me constantly, bought small presents for the expected newcomer and with genuine honesty looked forward to the arrival of my baby more than I did. It was to be a joyous event to them, someone for them to coddle and pet; while to me it was to be an unwanted burden, a child whose father I hardly knew, and most certainly didn't love. Yet, I was deeply thankful for their motherly interest in both me and my expected child, for there was no one in the world who cared for me really, and I took enormous pride in having them defend me in front of the other strippers. The only times either of them was ever impatient or cross with me was when some button or zipper did not work as smoothly as they would have liked in front of an audience, and on these times only because they were criticized by the other girls.

"Whatsamatter, Dahlia? Your fat butt jamming your zipper?"

"If you can't unlace properly, suck in your gut. The soldiers don't mind. They knew you was a tub of lard the minute you stepped on."

"If you're too old to strip, honey, lie down. Maybe the soldier boys will compromise and tear em off you."

"You're worse than a Jersey cow trying to untangle a parachute!"

Marlena chuckles, flipping her wrist.

"Pepper Panta is all mouth and ass, and they're both worn out."

Montana Monica pipes up:

"I could get out of a straight jacket 'fore you can wiggle outa them flimsy rags of yourn."

And on and on, coarse, crude, callous to everyone's feelings except their own, impervious to feelings except their own egomania. Not that they were basically hard, unnatural women. They were not. Like Dahlia and Pepper, they had been exposed too early and too frequently to the saw-edge of life, had been denied so much, had to give so much. Yet, they hated me a little, I think, and perhaps for the same reason. They had missed the womanly essentials: love, marriage, motherhood and parenthood, the things they thought I owned, so I steered clear of them unless unavoidable.

At night, in the noise of the music and dancing, the monotonous vibration of the drums as the strippers went on stage, the wild yells, the whistles, the cat calls from the thronging soldiers and sailors, my head seeming to burst through my skull, I would slip out alone and go down to the beach where I walked up and down in the wet sand. The roaring of the surf, the smell of fish on the salt air, and the driving wind soothed me a little, banished my thoughts of the club, the rotten part of it, the sex it conveyed, strangling the place, as the smoke from thousands of cigarettes strangled it, foaming to the windows and doors. I could endure it just so long, the maddening hours of noise heaped sound upon sound, the rocking dancers swaying the whole building till its foundations, its tall rafters groaned, could endure just so long the male voices, thick with drink, calling after the beefy strippers, sex hungry voices, deep, masculine, powerful, thronged like one monstrous sound, and all of it not meant in any way for me. Sounds: men calling after some other woman, pursuing her in the darkness, over some dimly-lit table, across the crowded dancefloor, stifling male voices which invaded my mind, calls which I could not follow, outstretched arms which would never hold me, wanton lips which would never touch mine, love voices, sex voices which would never speak to me, were never intended for me . . . all because of my baby . . . my damned unwanted child!

God! I was miserable!

Unable to endure the sex world longer, I would rush out into the darkness, down to the beach, fling myself in the sand, bury my face against mother earth, as I had lain in the lap of Mama, and I cried and wished that I had never been born.

It was here one night that they found me, my body soaked from the onrushing tide, my eyes staring stupidly into the heavens, beyond the dark storm clouds, to the stars.

Lifeless, no longer caring, about me nor my child, immune to all hurt, all pain, beyond all heartache, for it had ached so long, as much as it could ache, I was taken to the Charity hospital and placed in the maternity ward. There, amid the cries, the labor pains of other women, I prayed that I would die.

Now that the time had come, time to bear my child, I didn't want to go on. For the first time, I thought dimly, like a ghost figure in a ghost world rapidly approaching, I saw myself after the birth of my baby, working, tending him, scratching to make ends meet; saw my life as one long endless stream of misery and labor and privation and unhappiness ... much unhappiness. And God knows, I had had enough of that!

I was hardly aware of anything, day or night, except occasional moving shapes which came to my bedside, leaned over me, whispered ... whispered ... ghost shapes out of nowhere, formless faces, formless words, and then mouthfuls of hot food, then darkness, then quickly, light again ... more shapes looming, bending dangerously, frighteningly close, more humming of voices, mysterious, distant, indistinuishable. And white—always there was that blinding whiteness. Everything was white, the walls, my bed, the shapes, the terrible looming shapes.

Sick, floating like a ponderous weight in this sea of whirling white, I longed to curse God then die. Somebody in the Bible had done that—cursed God then died. What a relief! Darkness! Kind darkness! Peace at last! Quiet. Oh, such quiet!

Suddenly, borne up out of my ocean of delirium, I could see, and could feel, and I was back in the world once more, and Pepper and Dahlia were bending over me. They were a flurry of flowers and beads and rustling silk, and dyed hair and paint and rank with perfume. But suddenly I loved them, as I had never loved anyone in my life.

"It's a boy!" Dahlia cried, her face radiant as a China doll's, her enormous eyes rimmed in black mascara, her fleshy, wax-like face framed in a halo of shining hair the color and texture of cornsilk. Her arms, fetted with gaudy bracelets and slave rings, were loaded with packages, which she dumped on the bed. "Do you understand, Tala? A boy! A beautiful, bouncing baby boy!"

"This old hag ain't lying," Pepper spoke up, her voice coarse, deep, her crudely painted lips pursed up as she spoke to me, as if she was addressing the child itself and not me, a woman grown. "The finest, healthiest boy I've ever laid my whorey eyes on, Sugar. You'll be proud! Be glad you carried him till his time."

"Can I see him?" I ask meekly, straining wearily as if he might be lying beside me all along, and not noticing. With a feeble hand I lift the sheet, peer beneath. Then I look at them with mock surprise. My stomach was so flat, so thin. I did not even know when I had borne him, when he had come into the world.

"Not now," Dahlia soothed, patting my hand. "Later. You can see him later, Sugar. When you're better."

They are both all eyes as they gloat over me, like animals peering out of a knot-hole.

"But . . . but there's someone to see you," they both blurt out at the same time, as giggly as high school girls.

"Who?" I cry, as my mind spins in a vision of human faces—faces I had grown to know during my past, had liked, loved, hated, a little. Papa, Aunt Pauline, Joel, Claudine, Travis, Dolly, and many more, sharp, vague, each diminishing as another emerged to take its place. Then Swain ... no, it couldn't be Swain. I cry out at the thought. Who then? Gil! No, not Gil ... the cause, the ultimate reason for all my pains. And I ask again: "Who?"

Dahlia beams.

"Your husband, dear!"

"My husband!" I cried, loudly-shocked.

Both their faces fade to deep seriousness.

"Tala, we didn't know you had a husband, till today. Honey, why didn't you tell us ... why?"

Chapter Seventeen

Dahlia and Pepper dismissed themselves in a crescendo of nervous laughter and, when they were gone, their gaudy perfume still clinging to the room like a tainted memory, I lay and waited with wild anticipation hurling through my heart.

Swain! Could it be Swain?

It was *Thad!*

Closing the door slowly behing him, he advanced to my bedside, his face radiant, smiling at the sight of me.

"Thad!" I cried excitedly, thinking what a pleasant surprise, with a breath of happiness in my delirium, my own acute unhappiness.

"Tala!" he whispered, bending over me and taking me by the hand. I have never seen him so handsome, so tanned, so utterly mature in a khaki Air Force uniform . . . the picture of health.

"How did you ever find me?" I blurt out, thinking wearily that no one knew nor cared where I was, what I did, or what happened to me.

"I just followed the yellow brick road," he answered and bending still closer, he kisses me on the brow.

We both laugh.

"No, really," I stammer. "Who told you I was i Mobile?"

"Your Aunt . . . Aunt Pauline and my cousin Dolly You remember her?"

I nod. "Of course. One of my best friends at school How is she, Thad? How is everyone?" And as I ask my mind rambles on, seeing in visions the lovely face out of my girlhood, and Thad bringing it all back t me.

"She's an old maid," he answers, and his expressio is serious. "Has worked too hard all her life, no tim for men friends. Mother is fine, but Aunt Sybil, yo know, passed away last summer . . . a stroke."

"No, I didn't know," I whisper, a little grieved, for knew how much he cared for her. "But I've been out o touch with everyone," I manage to apologize for m lack. "I hear from Aunt Pauline, Claudine, and that i about all. I never was good at writing letters. An Papa . . ."

"I'm sorry to hear about him," he says quietly interrupting. "Heard Christmas when I was in Sallis. He gives a heavy sigh. "Everything is so changed Nothing is the way it use to be—nothing."

"I know," I agree, staring for a moment out the prin little window, recalling the torment of my past. "We'v all drifted away. All the kids I went to school with . . everyone I knew, loved."

"The war I guess," he remarks, staring out th window too.

There is a long silence.

He then turns and looks at me sadly, a long forlor but searching look.

"Do you ever hear from Swain?"

"Sometimes," I explain, glancing at him out of th corners of my eyes. "He's somewhere fighting in the Pacific, just where I don't know. They censor his letters. But I do not stay at any one place for long, and it takes forever for his letters to catch up with me."

He looks at me, puzzled.

"Why?"

"Oh, God! Don't ask me that!" I cry, for I had asked myself that same question a million times and I still did not know the answer. "Shame, I guess . . . and a lot of other worthless things."

"You still fighting that?"

"Thad . . . you don't know all I've done."

"I have a pretty good idea, especially after the way you talked at your Mother's funeral. It worried me sick. I knew you would go off and do something desperate . . . after Swain . . . after your mother."

"Then why did you come here . . . come looking for me?" I cry, before I think, his kind voice reviving the past, and I did not want it revived. The pain was too great, and I had stood enough of pain.

"Why, Tala," he answers, and he stiffens, his strong back, his wide shoulders arched. "Because I still love you, will always love you. I cannot get you out of my mind."

"Do you know what I've done . . . all I've done?"

"About the baby you mean?"

"That . . . among other things."

"Yes . . . the head nurse told me."

I cannot look him in the eyes.

"Is that why you told her, Dahlia and Pepper that you were my husband?"

"I had to make it legal."

"To save my face?"

He gulps, drops his eyes . . . those bright cornflower eyes, and he blushes like a timid schoolboy.

"To save both our faces," he mutters hoarsely, his face deep with shadow beneath his crown of wheat-colored hair. "We've both been fools. I should have married you long ago, saved you from all this. It's my fault. I should have been man enough to keep you."

"Oh, Thad, you're too fine," I whisper, on the verge of a wild outburst of tears. "Too utterly fine and noble for your own good. How can you still want me—knowing completely what I am?"

He takes my hand in both of his, turns it over and over, then palm up where he kisses lightly, his mouth clean, fresh, warm.

"Whatever you did wouldn't change my feelings for you, Tala. You know that. When you love someone, really care, then why should love ask a reward? Your face has haunted me all this time, these past few years, in basic training at Tyndall and Keesler in Biloxi; haunted me in my dreams, my every waking hour. I loved you knowing you were with Swain. So why should I love you less knowing you have been with other men?"

"Thad, you don't really know me," I cry, and now I cannot keep the hot tears from flowing, still the beating of my frantic heart. "I'm rotten, through and through. If you really knew me, the things I've done, you would never speak to me again. Men don't love women like me."

"All right," he says, looking stern. "Maybe you haven't been an angel . . . but neither have I."

I hide my smile.

"You, Thad! Don't be silly!"

He turns crimson, and I am ashamed that I have spoken so rudely.

"So . . . I'm not Swain!" he comes back tartly. Then his voice mellows. "I've proved my love. I've come to take you home, and that's more than he has done."

He has me there. I glance at him, sidewise, try and gauge his expression. He has told the truth. Swain had never followed me one inch. I had always gone to him.

"He would have," I say tartly. "But the war . . . he's had to fight!"

"What about before the war?"

Again, I cannot answer. For I realize painfully that, had Swain wanted to, had he really cared for me, he would have found a way to be at my side, despite Mama and Papa, despite public opinion, despite the Marines and the war. Yet, I loved him, and that love cancelled out all his wrongs, his lack of care.

"Oh, well," Thad says, frowning. Then his expression is bland again, free of the wrinkled brow, a down twisted lip, remorseful eyes. "It's all over and done now. What is gone is gone and will never be again, so why worry about it? It's our future now, Tala, that I'm concerned about, yours and mine. I've waited for you as long as I'm going to wait. You'll never get away from me again . . . ever."

I lie and listen to his words, his smooth voice, and think how wondrous both are; think what life could be like with him now, his desperate loving, his protection. I never knew how fine he was till now, and I wonder if, at last, there is really someone who genuinely cares for me, loves me, regardless what I am. Yet, as well, as he speaks on and on, laying out plans, building our future on such lovely, promising words, I see the ugly picture of myself, what I have become, and I cannot bring myself to wound this kind, gentle person, cannot hurt him as I know I will hurt him . . . loving Swain so much, so overwhelmingly.

"Thad, don't bank on me," I manage to whisper, deeply serious. I busy myself straightening the sheets up over my bosom, creasing the folds neatly over my flat stomach, resting my weary, tearfilled eyes on the immaculate white of the material. "Like when Mama died, you're making impossible plans again, saying you care, want us to be together, when you know—knew then—that I loved Swain. Yes, I know," and I say this quietly, "Swain has ruined my life. I did not realize it then, but I realize it now. It has taken a lot of bed-hopping to see this, to pound it into my feeble brain, but I know it at last. Maybe that is why I love him so hopelessly, maybe that is why, since him, I can't seem to straighten out, to level out, but, whatever he is . . . good or bad, I still love him, and still want him."

There is a pulsing silence for a moment, as we both gauge the future, as time ticks away in this white room, into hours, days, and into an eternity. Finally, he raises his golden head, and his pale blue eyes look at me, a frightening, complex look, and I am taken out of my senses.

"Maybe you will always love him," he says at last, his voice choked with apssion. "Maybe I will never have a chance to win you. But I have got to start now, Tala, if I am ever to win you at all, right now, this minute. If I wait, if I go back to Keesler, God knows where I will find you next, or in what kind of fix. So, winning you or not, I've got to stop you, for your sake, baby, if not for my own. The whole world is at war, fighting, killing, and I may ship out any day now, who can tell? And I am not going to take the chance of going overseas, to have to fight, and worry about you while I am gone." He stops talking for a moment, catches his breath with a sigh, then continues. "The baby, the little boy is ours, yours and mine, before God, if not legally. Who ever fathered it I don't care . . . its too late to care. And we'll never bring up the subject again. I'm going to take you out of here this night, your things, wherever they are, can rot for all I care, and you and the baby and I are driving up to Kosciusko, to your home. I'll get Dolly to care for you until you're well enough to get around, until I can come back up from Keesler to be with you."

"Thad . . . Thad . . . I can't, I just can't!" I cry miserably, thinking of Swain, my past, my God-awful past, and him, so fine, so utterly clean and wonderful . . . too good for me. I had ruined my life, maybe Swain's, had killed Mama, but I couldn't, wouldn't hurt the only decent man left in the world.

"You can," he insists, grinning that twisted grin of his. "Besides, you're not able to fight back, not just now anyway. You've lived with Swain. And I'm certain you've lived with many others. So you have no excuse not to live with me. As soon as we can, we'll get married. But until then . . ."

"What will Swain think?" I ask, my mind whirling in the security he is offering, an asylum from all my grief, my privation, my unhappiness, and I see him standing before me like a golden knight out of my early girlhood dreams, that beautiful Sunday afternoon when he had stripped, easing the awesome indisposition of my twisted mind. He had tried to help me then, just as he was trying to help me now, eager to give something essential and beautiful to my life, not take from it, as other men had done . . . even Swain.

"I don't give a damn what he thinks," he answers, harshly. "Besides, he may never come back. He may get it overseas."

I cannot believe he is saying this, and I ask profoundly:

"Would you care if he died, Thad . . . would you really care?"

He studies for a moment.

"If I thought his dying would bring you closer to me, then no, Tala, no. I wouldn't care. He has been a thorn in my side—a shadow between us ever since the first day I met you. Maybe God will pluck it out."

I sob: And I ponder men, the awesome, unpredictable undercurrents of them and I ask feebly, too tired from child labor to really understand or care: "Thad . . . do you truly love me so much?"

He does not have to wait to answer.

"So much, Tala . . . so much I'll be tempted to kill him myself, if the Japs don't do it first."

Chapter Eighteen

Thad kept his word, and brought me home. Home at last!

We came up in a Jeep, with the baby tucked away in a clothes hamper in the back seat, came as we had ridden the old back country roads years ago, singing: When the Lights Go On Again, Pistol-Packing Mama, Paper Doll, You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To, and in old recall: I've Got You Under My Skin, and we talked, talked, talked . . . bringing things up to date since schooldays . . . a thousand years ago.

At his insistence, we named the boy Gideon Thad, after him and his grandfather which, ironically fit to perfection: the long collection of Gideon bibles strung out in those cheap hotels of fornication, that familiar black object lying near every bed, a reminder, a warning!

Home!

Desolate, forlorn, faded now, grown up in weeds, the fields taken over by seedling pines, the terrace rows foamed over with blood root and twisting passion flowers, the fence posts leaning, rotting, dust an inch thick on the front porch, the numerous paths grown over with Bermuda grass, completely hidden ... but nevertheless home!

Somehow, being back once more, surrounded by Mama's and Papa's things, my own half-forgotten bedroom, it seemed that Jackson and Miami and Tampa and Mobile were a kind of hypnotic nightmare, something that had never happened to me really, and pricking my memory, my heart in a stifling, terrifying nausea whenever they were brought to mind ... those dark shabby rooms, those greasy spider-webbed lights, those blinking neon tubes, those sex cities swarming with leering sex eyes, wanton, drunken eyes, and those wrinkled beds, the smell of whiskey, cigarette smoke, stale ashes, the rank odor of sex itself, the thick old-blood smell of woman, the powerful sweaty smell of man, the darkness come alive with naked thighs and entwining arms, faces eaten up in the blackness, the long parade of beguiling words, pursuing, angling, persuasive; the domination of soldiers, on short leave, eager, savage, rank with lust and taking out that lust on my body, the acid smell of urine, of toilets, of water, of hair tonic and body odors when that body is furred with thick wiry hair, and the embarrassment of some men, their callousness in the sex act, their whimsical demands—which were torture to me ... their coarse sexual striving to prove their manhood or something, and their primitive ardor, taking, taking, sober, drunk, sleepless, weary, sex-soaked men ... yes ... all that seemed like one ceaseless dream, a nightmare which had never happened, could never happen to me ... the pert, cute teen-aged Attala Rose!

Dolly McCool came, under Thad's direction, for he had to return to Keesler field, and waited on me and little Thad until I was able to stir about the house, the grounds, do the work for myself. She was a Godsend. Brittle now, her complexion faded, her thinning hair streaked with gray, wrinkled as a prune, freckled from field labor in the parching sun, a ghost from the lack of living, as I was a ghost from too much of it.

We talked constantly, recalled old incidents at school; who had married who, who had divorced, the numerous scandals, where schoolmates were stationed overseas, who had been killed; talked, sometimes with tears in our eyes, our voices catching at our throats, then at times giggling foolishly over some long-gone happening, still like kids whispering to one another in the hall, on the basket ball court, or when we spread lunch.

Finally, I was left alone with my baby, which never seemed mine actually, a visiting child rather. Busy with putting the house back in order, weeding Mama's flowers, cleaning around her grave—a chore I loved under those quietly-sighing pines, at hearing the baby's sudden cry, I would look up startled thinking, someone's visiting. Then I would think briefly of Gil, the nightmares, the baby and, leaving my work and going to him, I would bounce him on my knee, chuckle, hug him close, trying to be a mother, without the love of a mother. It was not in me to give, and he seemed such a sad little boy, that lost, haunted look in his eyes. I'd give him a cookie or toy, anything to keep him from crying, then return to my work, dazed, in a dream, wondering forlornly how I had ever allowed my life to get into such a shambles.

Thad came home from Keesler every Friday night and remained until Sunday afternoon. Loaded with gifts for me and the baby, he would greet us in a shower of hugs and kisses. He and the baby got on well together, romping and playing in the front garden, among Mama's flowers, swinging in the squeaky swing on the front porch, or riding one of the horses, little Thad perched up front of him on the saddle.

Then at night, when the darkness closed us in, I would lie in his arms, the baby sleeping soundly beside us, and something of peace, of balm stole into my life.

In the throes of passion with him, it was Swain's arms that went around my body, not Thad's, Swain's lips on mine, Swain's dark thighs pressing into the hollow of my limbs.

One night, he stopped abruptly, sat on the side of the bed, his elbows resting on his naked knees, his head buried in his hands.

"What's wrong, Thad?" I asked, pretending half-asleep.

"I just wish there could be two of us in the bed, instead of three," he muttered back, his voice muffled, thick, rebellious.

"You mean the baby?" I sighed, knowing, with shame, that he had not meant the baby.

"God damn it!" he roared, and as any man whose vanity, whose pride has been lacerated, "It's Swain I mean. He's always between us."

Leaping up from the bed, he went out on the front porch and sat naked in the swing. Finally, I had to get up and go out and tease him back. That was the night he cried in my arms, cried like a hurt, unhappy child, and sobbed forlornly, the sound of his voice tearing its way through my heart.

"I wish to God, Tala . . . that you'd let me love you . . . a little."

I knew it was all my fault. But I couldn't feel anymore. All my passion, my love, my yearning, burning desires were left far back on that vicious road, in those dark dungeons of rooms, those smelly alleys, those gaudy caves, and that all the passion I had remaining—that which I had stored away somewhere in my heart, my body—was for Swain . . . and for Swain alone.

Thad and I were quieter after that night. Something had come between us, something of a serious hurt, a deep wound, and the old frivolous gaiety was gone. He rarely if ever smiled, and when he did it was a forced smile, as if he had to for my sake, to please me in some way he thought I should be pleased, as if he were, by smiling, apologizing for something he had done wrong, something he knew I would not approve of him doing. And his hurt went deeper, far deper than mine, for I knew he loved me, more than any man had ever loved me actually, and I was left at a loss as to what to do.

I tried to cheer him up. When he came home for weekends, I had his favorite dishes ready, the comforts of home he never got in the service, living in crowded barracks. I bought books I thought he would like, books on art and sculpturing, and I took endless pains to make myself attractive.

I was still fond of him, as I had always been, and at times he almost made me forget Swain completely, with his handsome good looks and ways, his passionate ardour when he tried to sweep me off my feet, his beautiful body against mine in the darkness. And I was deeply grateful to him for taking me away from that other awful life, that sex-filled life of the streets, and I would have loved him, would have loved him madly . . . if I had never met Swain!

If I had not been such a complete fool, I would have opened my eyes and looked upon the situation as it was, then maybe I would have thanked my lucky stars that he had anything at all to do with me, especially since the way I had treated him, and the things I had done with other men. Actually, I was a cheap piece of baggage, not worthy to be a mat for his feet, and I should have thanked God each night for letting Thad share a part of my life. The most noble of men! Kind, considerate, loyal to his last drop of blood; loving me to distraction, when I wasn't worthy of even his speaking, his being civil to me. Any woman, even a woman of the highest ideals, would have fallen at his feet, would have worshipped him, his cleanliness of mind and body, his purity, his handsome look, his tender, little boy ways.

But driven by the madness of my desperate physical need for Swain, having been thrown into the dark anarchy of street life through the loss of him, my mind and heart played on the memory of his dark, savage masculinity taking me, and on the glory of the taking. And Thad and all his virtues, all that he could have been to me, slipped into the background of my life, my existence, as I made room for Swain . . . our life together . . . if and when he returned.

The war ground on, endlessly.

Christmas came and went and 1944 slipped wearily, placidly for me at home, into another year of war, another year of waiting. I tried to have Papa brought back from Whitfield in Jackson, but all they replied when I inquired was that he was in no condition to be left without a constant guard; he was indeed that bad off, the mainspring of his life having become unwound when Mama died. Thad and I went to see him one Sunday and he did not even recognize us, so I was like Mama, dead to him too, in his heart at least. So I never went back, leaving him in that grey shadowy world untroubled by the tormenting trials of his past life, to live out the remainder of it as peacefully as possible.

"The world he lives in is a world without doors," the intern said to me, as he walked with Thad and the baby and I to the waiting jeep. "He moves alone. No one, not even you, Mrs. Sterling, can penetrate that invisible wall. He has become as a child."

So, thereafter, when I placed flowers on Mama's grave, I lay an extra bunch for him. It was all I could do, the last thing I could do, until that day when he could join her.

Life became for me a great disappointment. A hollow, endless, meaningless world. Nothing seemed to matter any longer, Thad, the baby, nothing . . . except that Swain hurry home.

Then, one day a letter came. It was from Wroten. Swain had been wounded on Guam.

". . . he is being brought by hospital ship to San Diego," old Wroten scrawled in his sketchy, trembling hand. "Will let you know the moment he arrives at Oakleigh. He loves you . . ."

Chapter Nineteen

On that glorious day, mad for speed, I could hardly control my nerves, so anxious I was to get to Oakleigh.

I wanted to go alone. But Thad insisted that he take me.

Old Wroten, a skeleton with wrinkles, his ancient head wobbling like a puppet on a string, led the way up the stairs. Fumbling, talking all the while, he turned the knob and opened the door.

Breathless, I stood rooted to the threshold. My heart pounded so against my breasts I could hardly breathe. And strangely, now that I stood so near Swain, after all these waiting years, I hear the sound of Thad's voice as he had stood in the living room but a moment ago and said: "No, Tala. You go on up. I'll wait down here, with the baby." And when I had insisted, frightened now that the time had actually come, he had replied calmly: "No . . . I can't bear it. I just can't bear it, seeing you two together!"

My hand over my pounding heart, I entered the room as Wroten closed the door behind me, and made my way slowly across the rich wine-colored carpet to the bed. I stand at the foot and gaze quietly down at him, notice absently how the bright yellow shades at the tall windows spreads a sheen of gold over the spread, his body, his face.

"Hello, princess," he murmured feebly, and his voice trembled oddly. He lifted both arms and, hurrying round the bed to him, I sank beside him, my deep yellow dress—the color we both love—spreading out on the carpet like an enormous blossom. He pulled me to him and, suddenly, there was peace and triumphant victory in me, as though I had at last come in winner in the race.

"Swain," I whisper, burying my head in the hollow of his chest, forgetting Thad momentarily, my baby, thinking only of Swain and I together, at long last. "I've missed you so!"

"I've missed you too," he says, faintly, taking my face in both his hands and looking at me intently, a long thoughtful look. "You've been a bad girl, Tala. Ought to be spanked."

"I know," I confess, and all my strength slips away as I remember those years on the streets, those awful men, those nights. "But never again," I murmur, raising my eyes to gaze hungrily into his. "You've come home, and I'll never leave you again, ever. I'm going to stay here, with you, nurse you back to health, look after Oakleigh."

"I'm afraid not," he says lightly, though the impact of his words fills me with stark terror, and I look at him, my mouth a round O.

"What do you mean?" I cry, sitting up, my eyes searching his, still desperately hopeful.

There is a long, tense silence.

He avoids my gaze, then looks straight into my eyes, his deeply set, hollow, fatigued, weary from strain and physical pain.

"Tala," he begins, emitting a tired sigh. "I'm no more good to you, to any woman. Got shot up—shot up bad!"

"What do you mean?" I ask, numbly, my brain whirling.

"Damn! Didn't I make it plain enough? My crotch, baby. I'm all messed up. A Jap mortar . . . right in the bull's eye."

I go faint. I stare at him dumbly, my brain refusing to take in the portent of his words.

"But you'll get well," I cry, summoning courage, saying anything that will take that woe-be-gone, helpless look from his face, his hurt, tormented eyes. "I'll nurse you back. Please, you'll get well."

"I'll never get well," he storms, in that old, imperious way of his. "Can't you understand, Tala? I'm ruined as a man. I can't love you anymore, can't do you any good. Ruined!"

He flings back the sheet, roughly, crudely, exposing his emaciated body. He was hardly more than skin and bones and, as my eyes go down his body, to his groin, his thighs, the flesh torn, bruised, blue, the wrappings of enormous bandages stained, padded with medical gauze, I flinch, and my memory hurls my vision back to when I had first seen him that wild passionate night, his dark, dark body caught in the moonlight, sensuous, frightful, tantalizing, and his taking me sexually for the first time. I glance at him again, then turn my eyes away. I cannot look, cannot bear to see him now, comparing him to the way he once looked: so broad-shouldered, so tanned, so masculine, so utterly virile and mature for his age, so obviously athletic.

"Now you know," he says hoarsely, with acid finality, laying the sheet back over him. "Not pretty is it?"

I cannot answer for a moment, as my mind dips here and there, trying desperately to adjust to the situation, all my hopes dashed. I recall my long years of waiting for this. But then, I think of my love for him, the feelings buried in my heart, and I say to him calmly, hopeful of giving to our life a future meaning.

"We have our love, Swain. That's the most important thing. We still have that."

He shrugs.

"Tala, that isn't enough to go on. All we ever did was lie in the bed and screw, and you know it. We can't do that anymore, not ever. We're washed up, after this; washed up as far as sex is concerned. And I'm not going to ruin your life, letting you stay with me and me a cripple."

"You're not a cripple," I blurt out, rising. I bend over him. "You're still you, Swain, regardless of your . . . accident, your getting wounded. And I love you. I will always love you."

"Tala!" he half-screams. "I'm castrated! Can't you get that through your thick skull? Damn, woman. I'm not a man anymore. I'm a fruity freak. Do you want to live, to marry a half-man?"

"Just so I can have you," I answer, and with genuine truth. "I've waited and I've yearned so long. Don't make me give you up now. It's not your body I love, but your mind and your heart."

"Bullshit! Let's quit fooling ourselves. If it wasn't for our bodies we wouldn't have a thing to go on. What have we got to offer one another, if we can't offer sex?"

"A lot of things. We use to get on well together, before the war. Designing clothes. We could go back to that again. Besides, you said you loved me once when you wrote. You said that."

"Tala," he grunts, "men say and write a lot of things when they're in the service, far from home, lonely, away from their girls. You know I don't love you, never have. You know what I've always wanted . . . now I can't have that, so the rest doesn't matter."

I want to scream, to cry at fate.

"Do you really mean that?" I gasp, dreading the worst. "Or, are you just saying this, because you think

I don't want you now, after this, and you want to keep your pride?"

He looks away, at the yellow shades, as if he is seeing beyond them, seeing something I cannot see, and for the first time I truly notice how bad he looks. His face is drawn, thin, almost bone thin, the flesh pale, bloodless; his eyes dark now, endless pools of pain, and suddenly I feel sorry for him, want to fling myself on the bed, into his arms, want to ease his sorrow, his obvious unhappiness.

"It doesn't make any difference whether I love you or not," he begins, his voice low, like a voice far off, crying from the wilderness, like a lost soul Mama would have said. "What does matter is that I do not intend ruining your life. I don't care how much you beg, how much you plead, how much you raise hell. You and I are through, as far as love is concerned. I am *not* going to marry you, and you are not going to live in this house playing nurse maid to me, and that is *final.*"

So the blow fell and, so weak from the impact I can hardly stand, I feel a sudden dullness that will give way to sharp pain once I am alone and can think things out. I look at him quietly, with hand over heart, and say with every fiber of my remaining strength.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

He blinks back tears, then squares his jaw.

"Tala, I want you to go downstairs to Thad. He is waiting for you, with that bastard kid. They love you, need you. He'll take care of you, give you the love you need, the kind you must have, for he has both the body and the mind."

"I don't want him. I want you." I say, with a last effort, for I cannot plead, cannot beg. I must show at least an ounce of respect for myself.

"You think that now. But once you are with him, in the bed with him, taking that fine body, you'll thank me for running you away. You need a man, Tala. A robust stallion. Hell! shouldn't I know better than anyone, even you, what you want?"

"I want you. Please let me stay." I whimper, beginning to beg.

He frowns, his brow a mass of wrinkles beneath his tousled hair.

"Tala, if you stayed we'd grow to hate each other, just you and me here staring at the ceiling. And I don't want that, and neither do you. Let's keep it the way it was, something beautiful for us to remember . . . what you say?"

"Alright," I answer, choking back tears. "But what about you? What's going to happen to you?"

"Damn, Tala, I'm not going to die! I've had my day, my battle, and a hell of a good time thrown in. It's time I took it slow. I'm all petered out. I want to read some, study, maybe I'll write a book about the Marines, the war. Might even put you in it."

He smiles then, and his old boyishness returns.

"Now go to your fellow, before we both start bawling all over the place." He winces, goes silent, then says: "But before you go . . . come give me a kiss, wench!"

Blind with tears, my heart bursting, I lean over him and kiss him squarely on the lips, a long, wonderful kiss. Then I hurry out of the room and close the door. I cannot stop the flow and, leaning my face up against the sill, I sob out my heartbreak, wash away all the wounds, the long years of loneliness and agony.

Finally, drying my eyes, brushing back my long hair, I go down the stairs like a still-living corpse. Thad and little Thad stand in the hall, waiting for me, and as I go down to them they look up at me and, suddenly, they are the most beautiful pair in all the world. And I think numbly, before the vivid truth sets in: He's waiting, just as he has always waited, silently in the background, no matter what I have said or done.

He loves me and, saying this to myself, looking at him, his handsome face up to mine as he comes to the railing below, I suddenly see him as he really is for the first time, see how utterly masculine, how genuinely pure, how golden clean, just as on that Sunday evening when he had exposed himself to me, caring and loving. Now it was his heart that lay exposed, far more beautiful than is his body, and at this realization I rush down to him, smile a little, thanking God that he is still with me.

"How is he?" he asks, his face grave, darkly serious in the dismal light of the hallway.

"He's . . . he's alright," I manage to murmur. "But bitter . . . very bitter."

"I'm sorry," he says, dropping his eyes. "Tala, I didn't mean what I said that time, about wishing him dead. If you love him, I want you to have him . . . to be happy, even if it is without me."

"I love you," I stammer, nervous as a schoolgirl at her first beau. He takes my hand, his face breaking into a ready, eager smile, his blue eyes dancing, and he escorts me out onto the front gallery, into the lavender shadows of the tall, enormous white columns.

There we stand, looking at each other, our eyes questioning, searching, desperate.

"I love you too," he whispers, and his eyes are bright, leaping lights, and the late evening sun is like a splash of gold on his hair, on the sides of his handsome face.

"Mummy, why are you crying?" little Thad murmurs, tugging at my skirt.

"A friend of mine is sick," I answer, pulling his face to me.

"Is he going to die?"

"No, baby. He's not going to die."

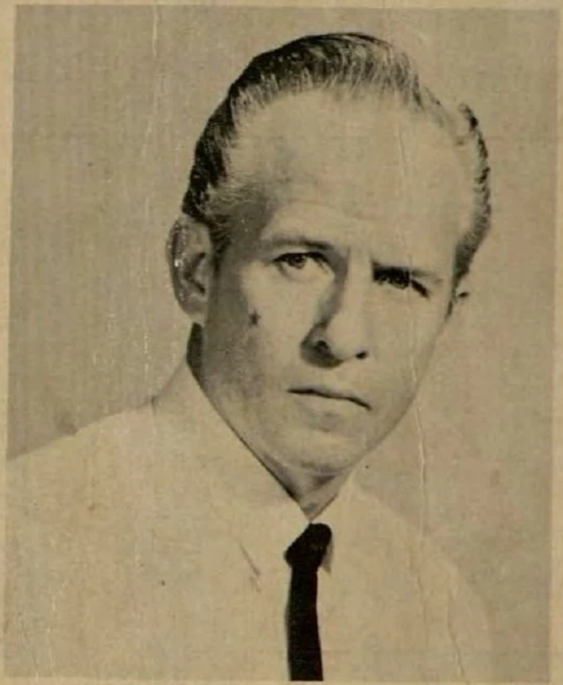
We climb into the jeep. Thad turns in the drive, under the shrouds of long moss, moss hanging like old gray men, grieving, and we go down the long twisting drive, that same drive I had come up long, long ago, and a lump catches at my throat, and I feel a hot surge of shame.

"Thad, I want to explain," I say, my voice fluttering, my bursting heart leaping out of my chest. "About everything . . ."

"No, Tala, don't," he says, firmly, his eyes steady on the road. "I don't want to hear anything. I don't want anything spoiled . . . for us."

He turns the jeep out of the long drive and onto the main road. And this time, as we head for home, I do not look back . . . I never looked back . . .

The End



CARL CORLEY . . . talented, prolific southern novelist, gives us the story closest to his heart, the one he has always wanted to write. Born in Florence, Mississippi, Corley saw action in the Marine Corps during World War II at Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Guam and Iwo Jima. He is now an engineering artist for the Louisiana Highway Department.